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Back cover: Binode Behari Mukherjee
Detail from *Medieval Saints*

From the Editor

OUR HISTORY, our traditions, the anti-imperialist movement, our contact with the West, define, so to speak, our relationship with reality. We feel it necessary to encourage a debate aimed at exploring this relationship, to see its limitations and possibilities, to interpret history and to try and look into the future. This journal wishes to emphasize that there is no 'magic' or mystique in art which would require new Brahmins to set it down in words. The ancient conflict between the *Vaidik* (Brahmanical) and *Avaidik* (non-Brahmanical) has to and is bound to come to the fore. We hope this journal serves as a major forum for it.

In this third issue Gulam Sheikh marks the beginning with a fascinating article on painting. He takes three artists of vastly different periods and cultures and makes a contrasting analysis of their actual *viewpoint*: he discusses each artist's life-perspective as it is reflected in his handling of pictorial space. To borrow Terry Eagleton's phrase, he explores the 'auctorial ideology' in painting, but in a greater historical sweep than Eagleton had postulated. Sheikh thus introduces into art historical writing in India an original, almost heretical, approach of great value.

This sense of history also permeates Rajika Puri's article on dance. Here the question is one of a perspective on art born out of the needs of the anti-imperialist movement. How does one look at the categories of analysis now that we have been a free nation for over thirty-five

years? A static, preservationist and revivalist stream has dominated our thinking on art. We are publishing this article in the hope that a fresh look at our traditions, their value, and their distortion will be initiated. That is the objective of this journal.

The anti-imperialist movement and particularly its leader Gandhi are the subject of the much acclaimed film by a British filmmaker. It is the Raj paying its compliments to its annihilators or so it appears. The annihilators were the masses. One does not know why they are being given this history in a package. *Rajadhyaksha* attempts an explanation of this startlingly celebrated phenomenon of partially false cinema and, of course, of partially false history.

Ritwik Ghatak was perhaps the greatest filmmaker this country has produced. In his work there are the myths and rituals of our people. There is Bengal. There is the partition of Bengal. There is also a firm rejection of the view that art is some kind of a mystique. Art springs from the people and it has to end in them. The article on *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, focussing on the use of myth and ritual in that film, gives one dimension of the brilliant filmmaker. We also publish a review of the path breaking book on Ghatak and his work from a Marxist perspective.

Hopefully the articles we publish in this issue will make clear the world of discourse this journal wishes to claim as its own, a world that is outlined in terms of the issues, controversies and conflicts we have outlined earlier.

GPD

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Viewer's View: Looking at Pictures

Gulam mohammed Sheikh

MOST OPTICAL paintings are windows into walls or magical mirrors. Ancient Romans in fact used to have false windows and doors painted -- with views of the outside world -- in their private villas¹ (if only to fool gullible 'foreigners' with enchanted visions of paint!). The framed picture eventually perpetuated the legacy of the windowed vision. The Romans had also boasted of painted fruits that attracted bees to sit upon them : the Renaissance completed that myth. Every aspect of the world of appearances was arrested with utmost fidelity by means of the newly invented technique of oil. Illusionism became synonymous with realism.²

Illusionism changed the medieval European worldview as it intervened between the spirit of painting and the viewer. Now, the viewer was never left alone as he was in a non-illusionistic vision which allowed him to choose his own pictorial itinerary. The shadow of the artist hovered over every illusionistic picture like a ghost, asserting that the painting was his - and no one else's - a view taken from a particular point of time and space. In every viewing the viewer found himself in the company of the painter as he tried to adjust his eye with that of the painter.

Few paintings are more hauntingly illusionistic than Diego Velazquez' famous *Las Meninas* -- the 'Maids of Honour' -- painted in A.D. 1656, four years before the artist's death. The large canvas (over ten ft in height) is exhibited in the Prado in a special room. A spot at some

distance from the painting indicates the point from where the painter took the view. The picture ostensibly represents the princess Infanta Margarita with her retinue on a casual visit to the studio of the court artist. As we assume the position of the artist indicated by the spot on the floor, the stunningly illusionistic tableau becomes apparitional with every character in the picture related to us in space and scale. The next moment, our bewilderment at the illusionistic visage turns into an uneasy sensation as we spot the painter in the picture (behind a large canvas) looking straight into our eyes. Our discomfort at being forced into the position of the artist's models is relieved only when we discover a faint reflection of the royal couple in a mirror on the distant wall. Evidently, the painter is engaged in painting a large portrait of his exalted patrons. The king and queen are standing outside the picture (*Las Meninas*) we are looking at and exactly at the place we are. But that is a lie.³ Viewing through the artist's eye we know that he is *in fact* painting *Las Meninas* -- the casual visitors who have come to observe him paint the royal couple. This is further complicated by the fact that with the Infanta and the Maids of Honour he is also painting himself and the rest of the scene as reflected in the eyes of the royal couple. Having usurped the place of the royal couple, the scene also belongs to our eyes. The painter implies that while painting his own self in the act of painting *Las Meninas* and the royal couple, he is simultaneously painting every viewer who faces it. It is, however, revealed in the end that his eye is neither directed toward the king and queen, nor the spectator, but towards himself. Appearing both inside and outside the picture--visibly or subliminally -- the painter has compressed his two selves in a rare, molecular moment of time -- a feat only the magic of illusionism is capable of performing. A sort of mirror facing mirror which dissolves everything except the artist's ego into insubstantiality. The realization becomes unnerving when we find ourselves trapped between mirrors that do not reflect us.⁴

With such a force of physical inducement in the picture, the space in *Las Meninas* is felt in measurable quantities of scale and weight despite the evanescent quality of paint.⁵ Everything is made to look tangibly voluminous including the blank areas suggesting room for concrete objects. As we stand in front of the canvas we feel blocks of space in the arrangement of figures. The blank floor at the bottom extends between our feet and that of the dog and the lower edges of the canvas, the dramatis personae glitter at a middle distance, the painter on the left

steps back in dark space shared by two elderly attendants on the right. Finally, we are brought close to a man at the steps of a distant, but blazingly bright exit. As we move along the adjoining wall, the mirror with the reflection of the royal couple throws us back, right out of the picture to where we stand. By making the unnamable space between the painting and ourselves palpable, Velazquez takes us into his picture. Like the projection of depth beyond the pictorial space the painting is also invested with space extending over its flanks. The partially visible canvas on the left 'completes' itself beyond the frame of the painting and a prancing 'child' on the right brings in another 'outside' on the picture plane. Despite these openings, however, the overall feeling of space remains that of a dark enclosure. Intersecting lines run across walls, floors, canvas-frame as well as necks, waists and bodies of figures manifesting a spatial structure of crosses, rectangles and cubes -- ostensibly emphasized to ensure gravitational stability of figures upon the ground they are standing on. Further scrutiny leads to the picture being divided in two halves, separating the figures (with the painter's head jutting slightly above the horizontal axis) from the space above. The painter's brooding image then begins to make sense. The darkness of the studio assumes greater volume than the concrete objects it surrounds -- especially against the brightly lit dramatis personae and airy exits. Apparently, the light is construed to be theatrical and the figural tableau is quite well-rehearsed. The studio in fact is a stage acted upon and observed simultaneously by the painter from inside as well as outside.

The painting in that sense does everything other than what it purports to represent. The subversive intention is evident. Using the means of Baroque drama and Mannerist 'Concetto',⁶ Velazquez has reversed their conventional meaning. He has reduced royal personages to theatrical subterfuge in order to elevate his existential dilemma. The illusionistic device of mirrors⁷ effectively renders substantiality ephemeral. The structural stability looks illusory under the ponderous gaze of the painter which fills the air with melancholy.⁸ Transfixed in his place we view the world with him as he takes us into the pictorial space with his pervasive eyes.

* * * * *

Every painting draws us close to the artist's vision the moment we begin to probe his intentions. Often in the process we become party to

the act of painting. The painter on his part invariably suggests points of contact with his viewer.

Being essentially an outdoor vision, most Indian and oriental painting in general is independent of the windowed view which, among other reasons, renders illusionism unsuitable for pictorial expression. The kind of naturalism the oriental artist evolved was born of a purpose free of illusionism. Having grown along calligraphic practice, the manuscript illustration prompted reading across rather than looking into the pictorial field. The murals similarly indicated a scanning⁹ method corresponding to the successive opening of spatial units as the viewer walked (The pleasure of Chinese scrolls lies in joining the trekking of mountain paths the tiny figures suggest.) In such practices, the prolonged sequence of time involved in appraising the pictorial space is antithetical to the notion of arresting a climactic moment illusionism so faithfully adheres to. It is important to note how the attitude of the Indian artist remained unchanged even after the introduction of illusionism at the Mughal court. The appeal of the new formal technique lay in effects of graded tones (rather than chiaroscuro), showing distance (rather than foreshortening), muted characterization (rather than dramatic denouements), in short, as an aid in making the pictorial imagery believable, rather than 'scientifically' reproducing optical sights. The Mughal artist continued to use phased spacing of durational units with the result that the viewer read details as he scanned the pictorial field. The points of contact with the viewer still lay in the narrative structure -- both thematic and visual -- which he often indicated through a subliminal linkage of details.

The House of Shaikh Phul (A.D. 1605-15) painted by the Jehangiri artist Bishan Das, involves subtle structural manoeuvres the unsuspecting viewer might miss at first glance. He would, however, be immediately entranced by the amazing sense of empathy with which details are drawn -- and a close reading of the details would subsequently uncover the hidden structure. The stark figure of the dark, lean mendicant instantly attracts the viewer's attention as it is isolated, repeatedly smudged and redrawn for accurate delineation. Literally carved out of the ground he is in the process of digging, the image of Shaikh Phul emerges as a pulsating relief. The entire scene is, however, drawn in matter-of-fact, local colours with little use of metaphoric means. The accent on details is deceptively documentary; it conceals the breath-

ing, delicate sensitivity. But no sooner one begins to respond, every part of the painting emerges as a felt and touched entity. The dents and marks of the paved platform and its peeled plaster, the colour and texture of built structures and street dust, the varied tints of clothing recording periods of wear, the multilayer translucence of ochres and white (so subtly graded in the complexions of multi-racial characters; even in the teeth of a young noble man!). The amazing perceptivity revealed through details invites us to unravel the content of the picture image by image.

The principal figure of Shaikh Phul, 'a mad devotee who now lives in Agra' (as the inscription on the paving reads),¹⁰ is perhaps a Sufi. He appears to belong to the tradition of self-effacing saint-poets of medieval India who called for a unity of diverse faiths and initiated a quiet revolution from the lower rungs of the society. Many in fact belonged to the working class or identified their mission with manual work.

The picture shows that the mendicant saint has just moved away from the centrally located doors of his modest shelter, the dome of which displays the dark ravages of time. A minor panorama unfolds as we move along the images of people gathered around him. While a rotund young disciple leans forward behind the saint to offer a bowl presumably filled by a hawker (?), on the other side of the platform, a man (a royal emissary?) respectfully bows behind the boy to deliver some message to which the 'mad' devotee' is totally oblivious. Further right in the street, a group of people including 'a man of the book' is led by a young noble or a prince pointing at the wayward life of the saint. A pedlar with pots and scales turns around from the extreme right corner as a Muslim soldier in uniform passes by and salutes. To his left, a *bhishti* enters from the middle of the lower edge, exclaiming. Above, to the left of him, a sweeper dutifully cleans the street before the saint's abode. Diagonally positioned against the leaning boy on the platform, the sweeper does not look up: his homage lies in the act of sweeping. Further left, a Hindu martial character (with a *chandan* mark on his forehead) haughtily looks up with a sword on his shoulder. A woman in white steals a glance before leaving the scene from the extreme left corner. Above her figure, a hefty man raises his hand over his head in respect and further above, two men enter talking -- one with a pot of offering (?) -- moving towards the saint. Behind them, a well-dressed boy hails the 'mad devotee' from a lane and three whispering

women shyly and incredulously observe the 'naked' faqir. Moving upwards from the narrow lane rubbed by a broken, brick wall, we find two ubiquitous crows atop roofs of houses set against soft, yellow-blue splashes of an early morning sky. Further above on the right, the thick foliage of *neem* crowns the dome while another hangs over a shack with a waiting attendant near the kitchen.

As we follow the directions indicated by the figures and enjoined by aspects of the environment, a microscopic spectrum of the street gathered around the uncaring saint emerges in a circular configuration, virtually circumambulating him. The painter also pays his tribute by taking us round the image of Shaikh Phul. The painting emphasizes the gazes of people and the animated environment – both converging on the focal centre. The lack of reciprocation from the centre diverts them back to their places. The tension between the movements of closing in upon the image of the saint and an outward ejection constitutes the structure of this remarkable painting.

Naturalistic technique is used here to enhance plastic configuration : to string motifs of movement in a visual continuity. The gestures and stances of figures (as also the swaying foliage) are carefully co-ordinated to circulate within the central orbit, simultaneously opening and closing. The arrested moment from the daily routine of a saint is loosened by a series of connecting motions observed in time. We watch him communally or individually through the multiple eyes of the on-lookers in a prolonged sequence as we follow the subliminal pictorial route. The painter thus invites the viewer to join the scene from a number of points of entrance (or exit) in an open street.

* * * * *

It is no coincidence that Binode Behari Mukherjee's mural at Santiniketan (painted in 1947-48) represents accretions of the continuing tradition of medieval saints. For Bishan Das, Shaikh Phul was a contemporary whom he painted from life. For Binodebabu, however, Ramanuja, Kabir, Tulsidas, Suradas, and Guru Govind Singh were not living personalities of contemporary times, but still a vital force in literary lore and life. He looked for their likenesses and legends among the masses and found his Kabir in a common weaver.

The large mural (77 ft x 8 ft) was executed on the walls of Hindi Bhavana, then headed by Hazari Prasad Dwivedi – himself an authority on medieval Hindi poetry. The verses of Kabir, Tulsidas and Suradas inscribed on the south wall are indicative of the rapport between the artist and the scholar. The artist who had suffered from poor eyesight from an early age (he totally lost his eyesight in 1956) did not make any facsimile drawings – except a few small ones of individual figures and groups – and worked directly on the wall.¹¹ Presumably planned in units covering a span of manual reach, the mural evolved a continuity with the physical pace and rhythm of work.¹² The viewer senses intervals and links in the process of artistic execution as he walks the length of the mural. The units of space conceived as continually growing forms suggest several trajectories. The itinerant eye is led to traverse in multiple directions with the result that it returns to the point of take-off with a series of focal surprises. The engaged vision gets a concerted view of life.

The variety of scale and dimensions of figures works as an essential ingredient for the optical flexibility required for scanning the wall while moving. One remembers the discomfort illusionistic murals with a single point of view cause, not allowing the moving eye to adjust. Here, depth and scale, though indicated, are balanced out by means of telescoping the far and the near into each other in order to retain the imagery on the frontal plane. The technique of repeated layers of contours enhances the density of figures and projects them forth.¹³ Perhaps the artist who had difficulty seeing beyond a certain distance, was able to feel the space that came within his optical range more concretely and articulated it in the form of a palpable entity. Thus the imagery is brought close to the viewer's sense of touch: he can grasp it without straining.¹⁴

With the imagery advancing from three walls – as the viewer faces the central panel – the effect is akin to being in the middle of a crowded street. Notwithstanding the height of the mural painted eight feet above the ground, the vibrant imagery hoists him up amidst the panorama. One recalls the experience of walking through a maze of streets, opening and closing in its lanes and bylanes, with houses laid out in a bewildering array of open doors, windows, balconies and niches – each quivering with animated inhabitants. I have often wondered how so many individuals could fit into those staggeringly small interiors. We seem to have an amazing capacity to makeshift and adjust under acute

spatial constraints. One feels that it could be possible only if the space becomes elastic enough to expand as humans push in for accommodation. The logic of elastic space, closely following the life-pattern, seems to inform the structure of the mural as figures diminish in scale to fit into narrow enclosures or grow in size as they come out in open.¹⁵ It provides the mural with a kind of heaving wall-space that ebbs and swells as the figures change dimensions.

The architectural components serving as 'conjunctions' to divide and link the narrative¹⁶ are reduced to a relative significance in the process. The figural imagery overflows and dominates the entire environment and simultaneously provides another, if not too obvious, a structural cue. The human movements exude a rhythm of work and relaxation which is in fact derived from occupational habits. And the individual rhythm subliminally reflects in the composition of the crowds. The physical actions and gestures, culled from an observation of life are behavioural, not mimetic. Is it possible to define the nature of these movements? Perhaps one could recall the crowds of Ajanta and Akbar Nama where a delicate equilibrium of animation and restrain is achieved in the form of a collective body rhythm. Binodebabu's perspicacity touches that insight.

The theme of *Medieval Saints* has epic dimensions. Freely woven around the lives of five men, it runs into a number of subplots strewn in an organic pattern. Despite the intimate proximity with which the figures are modelled, brimming sentiment or sensuousness and dramatic climaxes are transmuted into a measured continuity of understatements. The narrative unfolds as a wide panorama projecting the mundane and the profound moments of life with equal love and objectivity. A number of touching vignettes of humour, however, relieve the grave tenor of the narrative.

Perhaps a brief itinerary of the mural would reveal the points under discussion. It opens with sadhus and pilgrims in the mountain retreat and gradually spills into a spectrum of the street punctuated by heightened images of saints and a militant Sikh Guru – all finally absorbed in the spinning rhythm of village life.¹⁷ In the first panel, the assembly of bearded, bundled sadhus pop up from rocks like sculptured steles as others preach, ponder, gesticulate. One is found napping on the slopes. As we enter the town a *panihari* turns away, an oversized child

dangles at a mother's breast, a sadhu stands for alms and tiny heads of women float in far space peering down at the assembly of disciples around the tall, grave figure of Ramanuja in discourse. The disciples, including Ramananda,¹⁸ are immersed in deep rapture. Further along we recognize a mendicant with a *kamandala* we had seen before in a wide street populated with a number of figures: a *bhishti*, a group of dyers, a couple of wandering *pinjaras* (cotton carders), a group of holy men including an orthodox religious head being carried in a *palakhi*. Somewhere in the middle a man is washing his foot (for ablution?) and above, a half-clad dyer is wringing out clothes, the movements of both radiating the rhythm of work and ritual. The solemn figure of Kabir with folded legs emerges as a realization of stored up strength. He incarnates the world of work he belonged to and celebrated in his verse. The panel ends with a musician and audience on the right including a mother and boy intently watching the saint.

The second panel has dramatic overtones. A towering image of Tulsidas faces his guru(?) whose expression of mocking incredulousness with an exclamating mudra and a serpentine staff, alludes to a climactic episode in the saint's life. While the right illustrates other events in the life of Goswami, on the left busy Banaras ghats are rendered with great delight. As shopkeepers, sadhus and men crouch in or emerge from interiors (including an animated barber at his job!), women bathe in the river or comb their hair on the shore. The effortless ease of the brisk curves with which the rippling women are rendered matches their care-free grace.

In the third panel the figures move towards the blind bard Suradas. Led by a young companion, he monumentally blends in the environment. The movement of the musicians in the street along with a man who has suddenly burst into song is completed by a couple of travellers who turn back to look. An entranced mother folds her son in an embrace behind the saint. Her expression of awe, wonder and reverence draws us close to the saint's melodious message. The tempo accelerates into a martial rhythm as we approach the last of the principal protagonists, Guru Govind Singh, on horseback with his equestrian and foot-soldiers. The elegant curve of Govind Singh's steed (emulated from a Chinese jade sculpture) and two crouching beggars facing the Guru provide food for thought. Behind them women grinding flour or churning milk, men relaxing or working in and around huts and a cluster of trees, absorb the

arrival of soldiers and sadhus in an open rural environment. The scenario concludes with the recurring image of mother with child -- now with a new born baby at her breast.

It is evident that the continuity of the epic mural is maintained by gestures and movements of figures. In other words, the 'story' emerges from corporeal rhythms. It is necessary to reiterate this fact as it defines a significant feature of the Indian tradition. The figures speak as much (or more) with their bodies as with their heads. Significance of the head as the crown of the human anatomy to be isolated from the torso did not appeal to the indigenous sensibility as it viewed the body as an indivisible whole. The Western tradition, however, used the head as an independent unit to convey all aspects of physical and psychological conditions in the genre of portraiture. The ancient Indian artist had, on the contrary, sought to transmute all forms of stress by infusing in the image a state of abiding grace. The practice ruled out facial and bodily contortions and excluded ugliness and violence from its repertory, to enforce an assertive vision of the fullness and regeneration of life. (Even the demons are somewhat redeemed or rendered grotesque rather than diabolic creatures.) With the absence of the requisites of portraiture, the figures did not assume roles of 'characters' or 'personalities', but remained self-contained presences. It hardly needs repetition that barring isolated examples of individual characterization, portraiture did not find roots in India until the Mughal times.

Binodebabu's vision endorses this essential goodness of life although he uses dramatic effects when necessary and strips from his saints overt spiritual connotations. His characterization is, however, less dramatic than suggestive more in the Far Eastern than European tradition. Emulating the archetypal Indian tradition, the bodily eloquent figures pronounce and celebrate their physical being; speech by implication is underplayed. Communicating without words -- through collective action -- forms the basis of a bond that often holds groups and crowds in India together. Such a relationship between people negates alienation. Is it incidental that there is not a single outsider either in the *House of Shaikh Phul* or the *Medieval Saints*? No one is looking at the viewer. The figures are not performing for him and hence are totally unselfconscious of his presence. He is not seen as a witness but a participant through an act of empathy. In *Las Meninas* the viewer is made to identify his destiny with the painter's in a confessional cube : his gaze is arrested and stilled until he grasps the truth of

the moment. Of course, the very use of mirrors can allow an illusionist painter to trespass beyond simple reflection and construe structures for multiple entry. The Mughal miniature liberates the viewer from his seat to wander off with the images; the mural makes him physically move in confluence with the emanation of pictorial space. This dual mobility informs spatial structure in oriental painting.

Jan 1981–Mar 1983

- 1 Ixion room in the house of Vetti at Pompeii, 100 B.C. H. W. Janson, *A History of Art*, 1977, p. 187.
- 2 'What distinguishes oil painting from any other form of painting is its special ability to render the tangibility, the texture, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts. It defines the real as that which you can put your hands on.' John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972, p. 88.
- 3 The joint portrait of the royal couple purportedly painted by Velazquez is not known.
- 4 This was written before reading Michael Foucault's penetrating essay on *Las Meninas*. Subsequently I have come to know of some German publications on the subject. None of these, however, necessitate any change in my views.
- 5 'The colour, rendered by touches and strokes, seems to have no form or meaning when looked at very close. In this picture exactness has been achieved by evanescence'. Xavier De Salas, *Velazquez*, 1962, p. 15.
- 6 'Concetto' allows the central theme to be relegated to a secondary plane and vice versa.
- 7 Jan Van Eyck had used a convex mirror to record his presence in *Marriage of Arnolfini* (A.D. 1434). In Velazquez' *The Toilet of the Venus* (about A. D. 1650) Cupid holds a mirror for the Venus who has her back turned at an angle that reflects her face for the viewer -- and hence that of the viewer for her. In *Las Meninas* the mirror device is more complex. Although the scene appears to have been painted as reflected in a mirror, it is controverted by the presence of a mirror in the painting.
- 8 It was a period of decadence for the ruling dynasty and decline for Spain which had made Velazquez' patron, the king disillusioned. See Xavier De Salas, *Velazquez*, op. cit., p. 8.
- 9 Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree*, 1975, p. 48.

- 10 Ashok Kumar Das, 'Bishandas', *Chhavi*, 1971, pl. 18, p. 187.
- 11 B B Mukherjee, 'My Experiments with Murals', *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 14, April 1972, p. 7.
- 12 'Rather than use realistic proportions, I tried to introduce a comparative proportion, I used my hand as the measuring unit. This I learnt from the Indian tradition.' *Ibid.*
- 13 The technique of multiple layers of contours is often employed in Ajanta murals. Compare 'There is no recession -- all advance toward the eye...'. Richard Lannoy on Ajanta, op. cit., p. 46.
- 14 Compare another observation of Lannoy on Ajanta: 'Here the eye functions quite differently from its linear reading of a flat image. It explores the non-visual properties of spatial forms, creating a sign language or optical braille for the tactually-educated.' *Op. cit.*, p. 48.
- 15 The method is constantly used in Ajanta, Hamza Nama, etc.
- 16 Similar to Mahajanaka Jataka at Ajanta (Cave 1) where a gate dividing two scenes simultaneously serves as both enclosure for the palace and an exit for the king's departure.
- 17 K.G. Subramanyan, *Moving Focus*, 1978, p. 75.
- 18 The smaller figure to the right as we face the mural. Ramananda's face is drawn on the lines of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa indicating a similarity in their syncreticism. (The information by K.G. Subramanyan who had assisted Binode Behari Mukherjee on the Hindi Bhavana mural. is gratefully acknowledged.)



DIEGO VELAZQUEZ, *Las Meninas* ('The Maids of Honour')
A.D. 1656 10 ft 5 in x 9 ft, The Prado, Madrid.



BISHAN DAS, *The House of Shaikh Phul* ca 1605-15
(Courtesy: Bharat Kala Bhavan, Banaras)

BISHAN DAS, along with Abul Hasan and Mansur, was a leading painter at the court of Jehangir. Considered 'unparalleled in taking likenesses' by the Emperor, he was chosen for a mission to Iran for making portraits of Shah Abbas and other royal dignitaries.



BISHAN DAS by Daulat, ca 1605-9. After, M.C. Beach,
The Grand Mogul 1978

DIEGO VELAZQUEZ (1599-1660), the Spanish contemporary of Rembrandt and Rubens, was a court painter of Philip IV. A master of illusionistic realism, he painted with an impressionist flourish and a penchant for silver-grey tonalities. Among his other works the portrait of Pope Innocent X (A.D. 1650), *The Toilet of Venus* (about A.D. 1650) are well-known.



DIEGO VELAZQUEZ, Self-portrait from *Las Meninas*

little consideration to the fact that they represent living traditions in different parts of our country. Kathakali is more often than not presented outside Kerala as one of 'the four classical dance styles of India', rather than as a living expression of Malayali culture. Yakshagana is appreciated for its quaintness, as a piece of 'folk art' or a primitive version of our legendary Sanskrit theatre, rather than in terms of an entre into an understanding of Udupi society. The various dance and theatrical styles are regarded as part of some long lost, common, pan-Indian tradition rather than as diverse expressive forms tied to unique systems of thought, all of which in equal measure help to make up that complex of societies that we label as 'Indian'. Even Bharata Natyam and Odissi are looked on as the dances of *devadasis* or *maharis* while we pay little attention to the fact that they have today been embraced (and perhaps transformed) by the general 'middle-class' public in cities like Madras, Cuttack and Bhubaneshwar. The normal contemporary venue of a Bharata Natyam recital is not a temple but a '*sabha*'.

We seem to have forgotten that such unificatory attitudes towards our culture were the result of a specific historical era when it was necessary to create for ourselves a sense of national identity as part of our struggle for independence. We needed then to unite under the canopy of a common culture that was opposed to the culture of the colonial power and at the same time claimed to be as valuable as the latter. Consequently, we oversimplified the notion of a common heritage, looked for similarities in the tremendous diversity of beliefs and practices, and tried to present ourselves in terms of an integral whole. This resulted in the creation of a set of unifying myths about our cultural forms that today, long after their original political purpose has been served, threaten to hamper rather than promote an understanding of our arts.

Some of the more common myths that I refer to are:

- (i) that our classical dances belong to a single common tradition, and that they have remained essentially unchanged for the last two thousand years;
- (ii) that these dances are 'art' and represent a separate Sanskritic tradition that is removed from the 'less civilized', 'folk' traditions;
- (iii) that they are somehow universal in meaning and aesthetic content (and intent); and
- (iv) that our dances are 'religious' (as opposed to 'erotic' or 'secular') in a very Western sense of the term.

In an era when it was necessary to delve into our ancient past to justify our claims to a high civilization, when the notions of 'literary' and 'artistic' were concomitant with 'intellectually developed', such beliefs were crucial. We were addressing a political power whose culture looked askance at the 'erotic' and the 'folk', and whose representatives believed that they had a right to rule based on a three-thousand year old literate and philosophical tradition inherited from Greece and Rome. We needed to prove that we were just as good. Today, however, we may reassess the above mentioned kinds of 'truths' since our interests in who or what we are, our national identity, should no longer be in need of justification to outsiders. It can become a question *internal* to our country and be made in terms of an independent people. If we must look to our ancient texts, or our over two thousand-year-old literate tradition, we should do so in the context of regional diversity as well as in terms of underlying unities. We need no longer be disturbed that the overturning of some myths or the discovery of inconsistencies will in any way produce a crisis of identity. We should by now be secure in the knowledge that we *are*; it would, therefore, be of interest to understand 'what' or 'who' we are in terms that make sense to *us*.

To begin with, we need to reevaluate some of the categories that we have borrowed from outside, but which are poor translations of our indigenous concepts. I refer to terms such as 'art', 'folk', 'religion', 'erotic', 'classical' and even the word 'dance'. To some extent, when we use these terms we do mean what they convey in English, but there are subtle differences in the Indian understanding of these words which we tend to ignore. Moreover, they are not always applicable in the same way to each of the different cultures that we subsume under the general rubric of 'Indian'. Yet we continue to define these categories according to Western criteria and then impose them on our expressive forms, thereby distorting the meaning that they have in our own societies. When we call the Muria or other tribal figurines 'folk art' we pay little attention to what these figures stand for in Muria society and instead, think of them as *objets d'art*. We do not attribute to them a sophisticated symbolism as we would to our more 'civilized' iconography.

We quibble over whether Manipuri is a 'folk' or 'classical' dance, forgetting that the distinction folk/classical (as applied to dance in Western European languages) was mainly used to differentiate forms like the ballet associated with the aristocracy, from peasant dances. By that

criterion, Kathakali should be called a 'folk' form, since all over Kerala peasants gather to watch these performances in rural settings. But then the distinction becomes meaningless since Kathakali is also associated with a warrior 'caste' (the Nayars) and a large part of its repertoire was written by rajas, who in turn were influenced by brahmanical learning. We are caught out by the imposition of distinctions that make little sense in the context of societies that were and are structurally and culturally different from the societies of Europe.

Perhaps then, we could argue, we also mean to distinguish between forms of dance performed by specially trained members of a society and those which can be performed by just anyone in a community. In that case, Kuchipudi becomes a 'folk' theatre, since all the members of that village were, potentially, Kuchipudi dancers; conversely, certain Naga dances could be called 'classical' since each community in Nagaland has its specialist performers who must be warriors. In fact, in the Indian context, the more important consideration for the distinction between 'classical' and 'folk' is that the former is overtly guided by the principles of dramaturgy as laid down in our ancient texts, whereas what we call our 'folk' culture belongs to oral traditions which are less self-consciously formal. The distinction, as has been pointed out by scholars like Dr Kapila Vatsayana, was made even in the *Samaveda*, where it was phrased in terms of *margi* and *desi*. While it is true that the usual translations for these terms are 'classical', and 'folk' or 'popular', respectively, problems arise when one thinks of them as mutually exclusive categories, or if one sees them in terms of the 'classical' influencing the 'folk' in a uni-directional manner.

Strictly speaking, no expressive form is either *desi* or *margi* exclusively; each is a particular configuration of *desi* and *margi* elements. Recognition of the interaction between the *margi* and *desi*, 'classical' and 'folk', 'literate' and 'oral' traditions of a region is crucial to a proper understanding of any dance or theatrical style as it is performed today. By ignoring this principle of interaction we are led to think of the 'folk' as a vulgarization of the 'classical' and seek to 'clean up' the 'classical' forms. Consequently, we tear the 'classical' style away from its nurturing environment, as it were, and so encourage its atrophy.

An important result of keeping in mind the interaction between the two traditions is that we can begin to see each style in the context

of a specific geographical area. The classical tradition of, say, Tamilnadu, has little to do with the Gujarati *garba*; it is, on the other hand, very closely allied to the *kuravanji*. Similarly, the Sanskrit songs interpreted in an Odissi recital belong to the same literary tradition as the works of Oriya poets like Banamali Das or Gopal Krishna Patnaik (whose songs are also interpreted in the Odissi style); they have less to do with, say, Telugu or Tamil literature. Consideration of this point might persuade the dancer who wishes to enlarge the repertoire of a particular style, to delve into the regional traditions of that style, rather than simply to borrow from another 'classical' style, and therefore another regional tradition.

There is a tendency today to look at the classical dances as being closely related to each other *and, therefore, apart from the desi traditions* with which they were associated. Part of the reason for this lies in the fact that nowadays these dances are generally performed in the larger cities and towns, miles away from their 'homeland' and the communities in which they developed. A Bharata Natyam dancer today is more familiar with Kuchipudi or Odissi than with the *kuravanji*, *kollattam* or *puriyattam* (dummy horse drama) of Tanjore. Yet, many of the *hastas* used in Bharata Natyam *abhinaya* are based on references to these more *desi* traditions (such as the gestures that refer to stick dancing in order to convey the idea of 'play' or *lila*). Other Bharata Natyam gestures are actually part of the everyday body-language of Tamilnadu – for example, the way of asking a question with *shikhara*, using the same *mudra* to refer to drinking, or the gesture which expresses affection in which one brings a *mrigashirsha* hand to the forehead as if to remove '*nazar*'. By over-emphasizing the fact that all the classical dances use basically similar *hasta-mudras* or hand *positions* we underplay the fact that the gestures, or *movements* they are used to make (the *vinyoga*) differ from style to style.

The important point here is that we should recognize that each of our dance forms is, to a large extent, culturally specific. We might think of them as separate languages that are distinct forms even though they all do adhere to the same basic principles of Indian dramaturgical theory. This would allow us to think of them in the context of the cultures from which they come, the literature and musical traditions to which they are tied and the particular social beliefs that they express. We would see them as part of living traditions that constantly grow and

change, rather than as fixed entities that somehow became fossilized over the centuries. For, although we do call the various dance styles by different names and speak of their distinct characteristics, in practice, we tend to dissolve the differences, particularly when we perform them on the urban stage. This can lead to a homogenization of the distinctive features of each style to the point where they lose their original flavour and approach a blandness that is then ascribed to the limitations of the dance forms themselves.

All too often we see performances of Bharata Natyam in which the dancer slips into the Odissi *tribhangi*, or Odissi recitals in which, instead of performing a proper *chowk* position (in which the legs should form a right angle at the knees, the arms a right angle at the elbows), the dancer maintains a 'half-standing' stance that is more appropriate to Kuchipudi. If the novice Odissi performer were aware that the *chowk* was supposed to evoke the Jagannath figure in the temple at Puri, it might help her to understand what the position 'meant', and why it must be maintained if one wishes to dance Odissi. Similarly, the young Bharata Natyam dancer might benefit from an understanding of the importance of bi-lateral symmetry of the body in that style. She might then avoid sticking out her hip to one side, simply because in the context of Odissi it looks sensuous, feminine or beautiful. She would also realize that by breaking the clarity of the classic Bharata Natyam line she gives an impression of sloppiness, and demonstrates a lack of technical control, rather than conveying any ideal of beauty that accords with the precepts of Bharata Natyam.

In part, the reason for such mixing of styles is due to the underlying belief that all our classical forms stem from an original source, and that there is, ideally, a single Sanskritic tradition with which they should all comply. In subscribing to this belief we forget that the very two thousand years of continuity that we revere represents not so much a lack of change, but a growing diversity of expression, a moulding and remoulding of ideas that has resulted in a plurality of form and content. Although it is true that some basic theoretical conceptions have remained unchanged, the interpretation of these concepts has been diverse.

To borrow odd Kathakali *mudras* in order to 'enrich' the Bharata Natyam repertoire of gesture is to deny to Bharata Natyam its basic scope for creativity. One has only to watch Balasaraswati carefully to

note how she creates new gestures in order to enhance her interpretation of a *padam*. But this can only be done by someone who 'speaks' a movement language well, by someone who knows the basic grammar of the language in which he or she expresses himself or herself.

Our dances are expressive forms that, like language, are tied to the beliefs of the specific social groups within which they developed. If we think of them as languages we can then study them for the different ways in which the societies from which they stem interpret what may, in the Indian context, seem like similar themes. Every language, whether a movement language or a spoken one, is guided by different principles, which are structured into a system of rules that allows for the creation of a wide range of meanings. To take any element of that language out of its context is to transform the meaning of that element, or to capture only a particle of the associations that it has within the language it belongs to. Take, for example, the English word 'juggernaut'. It is derived from 'Jagannath' but mainly focuses on the *ratha yatra* during which devotees seek *moksha* under the *ratha*'s wheels. Consequently, in English it is used to refer to an institution or idea to which persons blindly sacrifice themselves or others, or simply as something cumbersome, associations far removed from the complex of ideas that the name 'Jagannath' means to an Indian.

This transformation (including a reduction) of meaning takes place with any cultural borrowing, whether it be of a word, gesture, custom or concept, and there is no reason to decry it. The danger lies in thinking that there has been no change, or that the new meanings were already existent in the culture from which one borrowed. Underlying the latter assumption is a belief in the universality of meaning which comes from the tendency to attribute to other cultures the values of one's own and to emphasize only that which is similar. A case in point is the attributed borrowing of the *Tarana* of the Kathak style to create the *Tillana* of Bharata Natyam. While the similarities are of historical interest and demonstrate a meeting of the two traditions in the courts of Mysore, one cannot say that, as performed today, they are 'the same', just because both use similar rhythmic syllables or because the *Tillana* is often set to a north Indian raga. Yet, there have been performers in recent times who have ignored important aspects of the structure of the *Tillana* and have performed the dance to just the *pallavi* portion of the music, apparently oblivious of the fact that the Bharata Natyam item

conforms to the *pallavi-anupallavi-charanam* structure of Carnatic music, and always ends with a poem (in the *charana*) dedicated to a specific deity. Guided by the myth of the underlying unity, or universality, of dance, these performers actually misrepresent the form; in doing so they demonstrate a lack of understanding of the musical and literary traditions of Bharata Natyam and Kathak respectively.

This sort of thing can also happen if one thinks of 'dance' as a separate category of 'art', allied to but basically autonomous in regard to literature, music, painting or sculpture. While such a view might be applicable to American modern dance or ballet, in which movement can be explored for the sake of movement itself, it is not appropriate in the context of our dance forms. We do not separate the dramatic or musical component of our dances except for analytical purposes. The accomplished Indian dancer is actor and musician as well; he or she is not simply accompanied by the music but actually creates music in performance. One has only to watch Sanjukta and Ragunath Panigrahi in an Odissi recital to appreciate the interaction between dancer and musician. The dancer does not simply execute pre-set gestures— sequences of *abhinaya* or *nritta* — as beautiful movements *per se*; he or she creates the pattern of movements in order to present a specific dramatic, literary or musical theme, all of which are part of the 'dance' itself.

Just as our musicians are eventually more concerned with showing us the rhythmic and melodic possibilities of a raga than with simply impressing us with their technical virtuosity, so the dancer tries to bring alive a particular musical composition by presenting the rhythmic, melodic, dramatic and philosophical possibilities of that composition. He or she is often, therefore, a solo performer, rarely dancing in unison with another dancer, because he or she must have the freedom to improvize the combinations of movements in performance. An awareness of this improvisatory characteristic would lead us to realize that the dances themselves are not fixed; they change over time as each generation of gurus and performers re-forms them in performance. Over time, not only are new movements added, but even the grammar and rules of composition of a style can change. Occasionally, this change is made consciously. In our own times Odissi has been transformed by people like Kelucharan Mahapatra, Mayadhar Rauth and Deba Prasad Das, just as Bharata Natyam must have been changed at the turn of the nineteenth century by the influence of the four gurus referred to as 'the Tanjore Quartet'.

We should not abhor the idea of change, even if we demand of our innovators that they be well versed in the music, literature, the principles of aesthetics as well as the movement languages of the region and people from which a style stems. A lack of conversance with a culture or a limited understanding of the subtleties of a movement language can lead to superficial syncretist forms such as are found in some of our recent 'ballets', where the music is either inappropriate or the treatment of themes is banal. Fortunately, some of our contemporary 'choreographers' are steeped in a particular style, say the Mayurbhanj Chhau, and when they create their ballets with a sound understanding of the music, movement possibilities, literature and conventions that belong to their style, the ballets can 'work'. Their very choreographies in turn have an impact on the style itself, on its range and even on its structure, and affect future performances. We should not be unnecessarily wary of such experiments, as long as they are made within the tenets of the style and do not undermine its unique characteristics.

The uniqueness of each style has to do not only with special movements, uses of the parts of the body, spatial schema and characteristic musical accompaniment, but also with its content and the context of its performance, all of which are bound up with its particular social (including historical) development. Even among dance styles that developed as court entertainment, there are differences depending on whether the 'court' was intimately connected with a particular temple (as in Puri), or whether it was a predominantly Muslim court (as in Hyderabad); whether the dancers were male warriors (as in Seraikela) or whether they were women who had a ritual relationship with the king (as in Puri). Similarly, if a temple dance is performed solo, by a woman, then the dancer often represents humanity in its dialogue with a deity (as in Bharata Natyam), whereas if there is a troupe of dancers (as in Kathakali), each performer represents a specific deity or character and has to maintain that role throughout the performance. The first case allows for much more personalized expression than the second; it should, therefore, be no surprise that in the solo temple dance forms the development of *bhakti* is very different from that which is conveyed in a dance-drama form. Even between Bharata Natyam and Odissi there are subtle differences in the ways in which a dancer identifies with the god she describes or addresses, differences that are in turn allied to the difference between Shaivism and Vaishnavism, and their relative places in Tamil and Odiya societies respectively.

Not only does the myth of universality deny the diversity of different dance styles, but it also leads us to accept non-Indian attitudes towards our dances. This has, in my opinion, impoverished our theatrical dance styles. Take, for example, the insistence that our classical dances are 'religious'. While it is true in a sense, the question that arises is, what is the term 'religious' intended to distinguish? In traditional Indian life everything we do has religious aspects, whether it be cooking, eating, dressing or even bathing. Most of our daily activities are affected by our 'religious' beliefs. Indian thought does not make a distinction between religious and secular activities, and religion is by no means opposed to anything, least of all the 'erotic'. Yet, by stressing the religious in our dances we have in recent years engulfed our performances with a self-conscious devotional attitude. A simplistic interpretation of the idea of *bhakti rasa* is stressed to the detriment of *sringara*, even though the latter is clearly meant to be dominant in forms like Bharata Natyam and Odissi.

Part of the problem lies in our having been influenced by a particular ethos imposed on us by the British. They have left us their Victorian heritage which they themselves have, by now, largely overthrown. Consequently we, particularly dancers and audiences in urban areas, underplay the sexual aspects of our dances, conveniently ignoring the fact that the imagery of our poetry, painting, sculpture and music is intended to invoke the *sringara* rasa. We simply take refuge behind the notion that all our dances are 'religious' and hope that no one will ask us awkward questions about *sringara*. In doing so we deny to that concept the diversity of meanings that it has in the different cultures and dance styles of our country. Yet it is clearly a concept that merits understanding.

Sringara is not strictly translatable into English. The usual translation 'erotic' has associations that verge on the pornographic and do not include the connotations of 'beauty' or of 'bedecking and making beautiful' that are included in the Sanskrit concept. Also, in Indian thought, the union between man and woman is usually also a metaphor for the union between the human devotee and the Infinite Being. Although this concept is important to a proper understanding of the symbolism of our poetry, painting, songs and sculpture, we should not conflate the two kinds of unions, or stress the latter at the expense of the former.

All too often, dancers emphasize what they think is an appropriately devotional mood by using a pained expression to stand for an inner *bhakti* when the lyrics clearly call for a range of expressions that evoke human love. Many of the most beautiful of Kshetragna's poems and Jayadeva's *ashtapadis* are either not performed today, or are performed with a minimal reference to the sensual imagery of the lyrics. Yet these poems are among the most powerful expressions of *bhakti* in our literature even if they do call for very explicit references to the delights of sexual union. We would do well to realize that prudish attitudes are not indigenous to our culture and understand them as the mores of a foreign people.

Perhaps, however, we can still do something towards ridding ourselves of this imported prudery. We have only to watch Kelucharan Mahapatra perform *Kuru Yadunandana* to note how exquisitely a very 'erotic' theme can be interpreted. Just as, at the turn of this century, Krishna Iyer was able to wipe out prevailing prejudices about dance in Tamil society, so perhaps we can be persuaded in our time to give up our self-consciousness about certain aspects of *sringara*. The importance of this *rasa* to many of our dance forms is borne out by the following story related by Avinash Pandeya (in his book on Kathakali) about a woman actor who played Rambha to Kunju Pillai's Ravana in a performance of *Ravana Vijayam*. There is a scene in which Ravana tries to plead his love to Rambha, but she resists until finally Ravana has to ravish her. On this occasion, however, Kunju Pillai's eyes were so eloquently amorous that the woman playing Rambha fell into his arms, to recover a few moments later and flee from the stage in total embarrassment. Whether apocryphal or not, the above anecdote does present us with an ideal that Kathakali dancers attempt to achieve. It would, therefore, be helpful if we stopped explaining the religiosity of our dances in Western terms and tried to understand them in terms of our own indigenous concepts and beliefs.

Far too often, the explanations that accompany a performance seem to be aimed at the foreigner, with the result that our audiences are encouraged to think in Western terms. There is nothing more incongruous than to hear Vamana being called a 'midget' or Ravana being referred to as the 'demon king'. Why must we insist on explaining who Parasurama is, or think that the translation 'Rama with a battle-axe' could possibly add to anyone's understanding? It is unnecessary to add the epithet 'the

'monkey god' to the name Hanuman, which name has more associations with being a devotee of Rama or the son of Vayu than with explicitly simian qualities. When we overexplain the obvious we give away our orientation towards the outsider, an orientation that only encourages us to regard our dances as epiphenomena that are unrelated to our everyday lives.

We have too long defined ourselves in terms of the rest of the modern world, thereby seeking acceptance in terms of other peoples' values and norms. It is time we reevaluated our own myths about ourselves and our culture. I have, in this paper, dealt with a few that relate to our attitudes towards dance, not with the intention of providing solutions, but in order to provoke thought. The issues I have raised are addressed to both the performer and the spectator of dance, for the latter too is an integral part of the system of artistic communication, and so help to form it.

Gandhiana and Gandhiology

Ashish Rajadhyaksha

'I am appalled by the violence in the world today ... and I am going to do something about it. I am going to show that there is something else for youth besides street gangs and switch blades I am going to tell the story of Baden-Powell and the Boy Scouts.

Imagine! The final Jamboree, when the old man is almost eighty, with a hundred thousand youngsters of every race and colour gathered around him in peace and happiness It will be my last film, and my greatest.' — Cecil B. DeMille¹

IT HAD to happen. The usual epithet given to such projects is 'epic'; and it has clearly grown over the years from its original context of early Hollywood to being a vehicle for portraying the grand proportions of the values and mythologies of any ruling class that may wish to purchase it from its professional manufacturers.

It has drawn its myths from the Bible and from the great Wars, from big business and nuclear disaster. It has taken shape in response to the demands of a new political and technological age, an age that sees more than ever the need to underline a highly questionable value-system with the width of the 'epic' canvas.

The 'epic' – or the mass-spectacular -- in the classical Hollywood tradition, is the indicator of the superstructural dimensions of the commodity. At its simplest this is the money spent on the film, the vastness of the sets and the size of the crowd scenes. At more complex levels, however, as with DeMille, it relates also to another kind of extravagance, in the myths that are directly employed, the overpowering emotions that it indulges. By its very weight it is an indicator of the system that produces and markets it.

It had to, therefore, happen that the tradition that has thrived on imperialist grandeur, would one day also sense equally 'epic' possibilities in movements that have countered just such grandeur. If *Gandhi* is

therefore at all something new, it is so only in the sense that it gives an old search, generated by the voraciousness of the mass-spectacular, a new turn. The Raj films are already upon us, and as the Indian government gets the hang of the form, Naxalbari, India Gandhi's 1971 election victory and the growth of Sanjayism are all subjects that await an inspired filmmaker to sense in them their 'epic' possibilities.

At the time of writing this, *Gandhi* is entering its eleventh week in six theatres in Bombay. It has been granted tax-exemption by the Maharashtra government, and a directive has been issued from the Prime Minister's desk to all state governments that they grant a similar exemption. Every show in the city sees seats block-reserved for primary-school children who see the film as part of their history lesson, and it is not only them who are being shown the film as history come alive. Practically the whole of Bombay's upper middle class is awash in a wave of nostalgia for the leaders of its nationalist movement.

It is clear, in a way, that there has been a certain merging of interests -- between Attenborough's financial backers who must have first seen commercial possibilities in an 'authorized' biographical on Gandhi, and the Indian ruling classes, who have received their main myth polished and renovated for their own ideological use. Such a merger of interests between professional merchandizers of culture, in particular those from the American cinema, and large-scale political interests, is not new. It happened in the mid-thirties in America when the big studio came more and more under the Republican influence both economically, for they had been practically taken over by the large banks and corporations, and politically, for with other Republican interests they too felt the looming threat in Roosevelt's new policies. The market then was mainly foreign, the product -- as vehicle for American propaganda -- emphatically American. The product itself was completely artifical, for it did not need to have any quality other than that of a well-packaged commodity, and the artificiality was emphasized by the fact that very few films were ever shot outside of the studios then. . .

It also happened clearly in the late fifties and early sixties when Hollywood, in response to post-war conditions, first opened out and then turned towards Europe. The films shot in Spain and Italy were initially justified on economic grounds -- as with Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* -- but later, as it took roots in the new land, certain European genres

were also born, like the 'spaghetti Western and the European period film.

FILM

What is, therefore, happening in India, where no less than five major American films - Euan Lloyd's *The Sea Wolves*, the James Bond *Octopussy*, Merchant-Ivory's *Heat and Dust* and Lean's *A Passage to India*, apart from *Gandhi* - and one TV series *The Far Pavilions*, have been or are being made, has a major precedent in the Europe of the early sixties. The aftermath in European cinema at least is evident today.

What makes the form so remarkably conducive to being used for such diverse objectives? This becomes an extremely vital question in the present Indian context where all indications are that a shaky Indian bourgeoisie badly needing a retelling of its glorious nationalist past, is quite obviously resorting to professional renovators of myths who would use advertising techniques to refurbish its sagging image. It is the conventions that permit a superficial resemblance with history, while detaching the internal fiction of the film from the responsibility of historicism, and which -- once they have won the freedom to do so -- permit further interpretations of that history, that we must now make the focus of our attention.

The first thing the 'spectacular' usually does, once it has got a saleable commodity worked out, is to indicate its crucial role in larger social processes of change. A publicity brochure for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* says that 'There can be little doubt that Steve Spielberg's blockbuster... will have a positive effect on the status of current UFO research. Over the last three decades the number of scientists and other professionals, willing to go out on a limb and suggest that the subject needed to be investigated properly, were few and far between'.² The myth says, for reality to be taken seriously, it must be told convincingly.

In *Gandhi* the myth is created when the film subordinates the historical characters and events to which its theme bears superficial resemblance, to its internal design. It begins by making an appeal for a subjective assessment -- an initial title says that no film can ever hope to capture all the details about a man's life (which is obviously true) and that it is, therefore, more important to get to the 'heart of the man'

FILM (which does not follow at all). But nowhere is the subjectivity of the interpretation acknowledged; the effect right through is that this is history *as it took place*. In creating within the spectator a vicarious thrill of witnessing historical events in the process of taking place, the film neatly transfers emphasis from the events themselves to the characters that took part in them. This is how your heroes of that time looked, says the film, this is how they dressed, how they spoke to each other, these are their mannerisms and gestures. From the beginning the film generates an interest in the individuals – or rather, the Individual -- and the events are little more than dramatic props with which to highlight their greatness. A major component of the myth is the creation of the ‘epic’ individual who can interpret in the context of the bourgeois identity the ‘epic’ nature of events in which he participates.

From the very first shot – of a fiery red morning, by the Sabarmati – the film compresses certain impressions about the past, certain premises that provide the context to the spectator. The most ‘spectacular’ of the scenes, the funeral march, follows in the beginning itself: we are being readied for witnessing the saga.

This process of providing the scale, the ‘epic’ dimension, in the beginning itself is a vital aspect of the conventions of this form. The rapidity with which Gandhi rises to his full stature – Scene 1, Gandhi thrown out of train; scene 2, he recognizes injustice for the first time; scene 3 establishes the South African Congress; scene 4, General Smuts is already worried; scene 5, notices in the papers; scene 6, meets C. F. Andrews, compresses his philosophy into short statement during the walk; scene 7, Smuts to Walker ‘He’s the shrewdest man you’re likely to ever meet’; scene 8, establishment of his ashram – is possibly only because the history is known, the audience acquainted beforehand of what is to follow. It will also be obvious that this knowledge beforehand need not be extra-filmic, for the initial scenes themselves provide it.

But since the spectator is to participate in the events as they unfold, a certain feigned indecisiveness is also called for,³ some anxiety has to also extend to them. And so we have little dramatic encounters, like the one of Gandhi with the white youths on the pavement, and the suspense generated by these is what substitutes the actual, agonizing decisions Gandhi himself must have made at various points in his

life. 'For the problem here is not to build a myth, but to negotiate its realization and even more to rid it of its historical roots in order to liberate its universal and historical meaning.'⁴

This process of liberating of the myth comes in *Gandhi* with the fictional encounters that build up the episodic narrative. Every action that takes the film forward has to be placed dramatically, and consequently has to find its cause in a dramatic episode that precedes it. So Gandhi virtually seems to have discovered his role in life *because* he was thrown out of the train (it is amazing how many people seeing the film actually discussed as to what would have happened to us all if he had not been thrown out of the train); Chauri Chaura occurs *because* some policemen act beyond their brief; the Partition riots occur *because* one man throws a stone. It is, ultimately, this behavioural cause-effect quality that transfers interest from historicism to historical details, for physical likeness somehow seems so much more important than quibbling about what actually happened.

And it is, in the final analysis, this factor -- the ability of such a form of analytic-dramatic cinema to *deny* the historical -- that must be seen as the main reason for its success in finding roots in any culture, and the source of its unique ability to sell anything, from soap to revolution.

The first main attempt is to depoliticize, to make the man to be somehow beyond the events, to trivialize the immediate circumstances before the enduring, universal 'message'. Once the *individual* is established, and finds identity with every man in the audience, through that relationship the entire 'epic' superstructure may be established. The relationship then grows so strong so fascistic really, that the material conditions that gave birth to the character are easily pushed into the background. And so all signs of actual work are glossed over, the anxiety of choice reduced by the knowledge of history.

Having created the artificial image, the tradition immediately reinforces it with all the 'spectacular' accoutrements it has at its disposal. The first major close-up comes when Gandhi addresses the non-white audience in the theatre; the camera moves even closer when Gandhi and Ba face each other after she has refused to clean her toilet, paradoxically at just the time when Ba says to him, 'You're human; only human.'

Then we have Gandhi's peaceful march, which is charged upon by mounted South African police. As the horses bear down upon the peaceful demonstrators, the soundtrack gets magnified, close-ups of thundering horsehooves give the feeling that thousands of horses are charging down, and there are low-angle shots of the animals about to crush the puny man before them. The passive repulsion thus itself gets elevated to an 'epic' counterpoint, a worthy successor to the tremendous elevating shots of the man speaking to his audience in the previous scene.

As the unequal battle carries on, the 'castration'⁵ of Gandhi from his historico-political milieu is complete. The superstar arrives one day upon the earth, says the myth, leads a sub-continent to freedom, and more importantly preaches a doctrine of world peace. Once more however, as is typical with the form, there is an immediate return to the historical and political on a different level. The 'castration' is not just a denial of historical context; it is the creation of an arbitrary context which the character then justifies through the 'spectacular' in him.

Let us see it in this manner. A public figure, representing in his own life-story an extremely significant era in a nation's history, is in this film not shown as representing that history but for some inner powers he possesses. But in denying the one context, Attenborough has not accepted the responsibility of subjectively looking at the figure in another – nowhere is the *public* Gandhi transcended, and in fact all the appendages of the form have reinforced what is mainly the public figure. It is the sensuous impact of the portrayal that forces the audience to bridge for themselves the deficiencies of the fictional.

But our director does not stop even there. The reinforced public image now reinforces in turn a whole host of prejudicial notions about its time, which intervene in the ideological battles being fought today. It is really these that we should be careful to recognize.

In the first sequence of the main story, we are introduced to the young Gandhi when he, presumably reading the Bible, asks a black porter the apparently irrelevant question, 'Tell me, do you ever think about hell?' Next scene, with Khan, Gandhi: 'It is very unchristian, we are all children of God.' In that scene too we are introduced to 'Mr Baker', who as the 'sympathetic common Englishman' is a recurring

figure in the film. Next sentence, 'We come from an ancient civilization.' Sequence five, with Andrews, another reference to Christ, and Gandhi describes his philosophy as 'turning the other cheek'.

I am sure that even someone as glib with his answers as Sir Attenborough would find himself slightly pressed to give reasons as to why he found specifically Christian references the most apt in couching Gandhi's initial discoveries. But the answer is obvious, really. Within the broadly conservative tradition that lends itself the most easily to the value-system of the mass-spectacular, biblical references would be the most natural in a 'humanist' ideology – DeMille is an obvious example of this. What needs to be equally pointed out is that there was nothing more contemporary that Attenborough could possibly have used to counterpoint his version of Gandhism. The following points would substantiate this.

Having established the Christian context, the film turns to 'India' – the 'ancient civilization' that Gandhi refers to earlier. Gokhale virtually hands over the crown to the young prince, tells Gandhi not to listen to 'those people', but to 'see India'. And for the next so many shots we have slow pan shots over the Indian countryside, to the accompaniment of Ravi Shankar's strains on the sitar but a very Western tabla percussion.

Two more scenes, and we are in the midst of Champaran, because 'the people seem to want me here.' This is, in fact, the process of castigation; the arrival of the messiah, the fact that his very presence seemed enough to galvanize the nation to revolt.

But who recognizes this avatar? Not the generally grim-faced Indians around Gandhi, although Gokhale sees in him a 'successor' and Nehru comes to him for spiritual advice. Never do the masses show themselves as composed of individuals, as other than faceless. The Indian leaders are more concerned with the question of power, the British bureaucracy (barring the glamorous Mountbatten) are only concerned because he is an antagonist shrewder than the others. It is the 'Mr Bakers' of the film – the commoner British folk like Kallenbach, Andrews and Mirabehn, and as Mirabehn says to Gandhi about the people 'back home' that 'they understand, they really do' – who carry the legacy forward. And ultimately, the two journalists in the film,

Walker and Margaret Bourke-White, are the historians, who make the world aware by recording for posterity the phenomenon they see before them. It is these that Attenborough clearly identifies with, and sees as his own predecessors.

The pattern is thus clear. Within the dramatic cause-effect style of storytelling, one action leads to another, the riots occur because one man throws a stone. Implicit here is the subconscious assumption that if the stone had *not* been thrown, the riots would not have occurred. It is a logical conclusion to the viewing of an event in other than historical terms, a common tactic, for instance, of governmental investigative reports on riots where causes are all sought in individual actions. It is, therefore, equally implicit that if something significant is to emerge from that entire history it is that which transcends the immediate events, the 'message', and so the historian on the spot and later who recognizes this has to be the man credited for all this. Walker, Bourke-White, and Attenborough. And if it is they, not the Indians, who recognize Gandhi's greatness, they could do so only in *their* context.

A double operation of addition and subtraction at the end of which the historical axis, having been abolished and mythified, returns cleansed of all impurities and thus recuperable to the service of not just Morality but of the morality reassured by capitalist ideology. Morality not only rejects politics and surpasses history, it also rewrites them.⁶

The 'epic' of this tradition then does not distort history, it *rewrites* history. It rewrites in the context of the present, for it cannot obviously succeed unless it becomes relevant to contemporary ideological positions. Equally, however, it seeks to disown that present, by preaching from a pulpit placed in timelessness. In preaching, it moralizes places itself above the political. The rewriting, which leaves significant parts unsaid, gets away with all this because it places the *version* above the *fact*, while of course feeding upon the fact. The distilling machine for history, thus, is complete.

In this, since both the beginning and the end are detached from their material context (the beginning by creating the heroic character, the end by curtailing the logical conclusion of creating such a character), it is possible to indulge the masses with mass-spectaculars that are in a sense drawn *from* themselves. It is even worse than commodity

production, for here it is the masses feeding upon themselves, their own history.

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It is obvious that this would have an immense utility to any ruling class. In India today, with the growth of regionalist reaction threatening the nationalist bourgeoisie with increasing belligerence, more than ever in the past does the latter need a resurgence of nationalist values. For a long time now, the all-India commercial cinema in Hindi has been effective in keeping regionalist sentiments down. (It is interesting to see how in the South it is the regional cinema that is at the forefront of separatist movements, and how N.T. Rama Rao and M.G. Ramachandran have used this.) But there has never been the expertise required to raise nationalism above its naive populist form in mass-media, and peddle it in the name of 'art'. It is here that *Gandhi* has made what could be the first formal breakthrough.

Before it appears that one is possibly seeing too much of prior intention behind all this, one must add that Attenborough is certainly not either intelligent enough, or good enough as a filmmaker, to have worked out his biases consciously. But one must add that it is just his tribe that would enter into such 'contracts' with Third-World ruling classes, of 'purchasing' a major nationalist myth and 'reselling' it to them in renovated form. The manner in which he has claimed authority to intervene in that 'history by proxy of personal acquaintance with its principals - he dedicates the film to Nehru, Mountbatten and Motilal Kothari -- or that one instance when, denied the right to shoot in the Rashtrapati Bhavan by the then President, he said that the first Indian President Dr Rajendra Prasad had personally invited him to shoot in the Bhavan, and the statement went conspicuously uncontradicted, all this is a clear indication of the understanding between him and the Indian government. Far from a Griffith, a Ford or a Welles (whom he would like to consider his predecessors), one cannot imagine even a Huston or a Lean stopping to such depths.

One can only conclude with the hope that the very mediocrity that has led to such uses of cinema will itself betray the intentions of its sponsors. As happened during the Emergency, too much of a good thing can also boomerang on the men benefitting from it.

This article is not about Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*. It deals, rather, with the circumstances that demand a *Gandhi* and make it possible. If at any point in the future an attempt is made to use the article to confer an intellectual legitimacy to the film, I would request readers to bear in mind that this is most emphatically not the intention of writing it. So systematically has Attenborough exploited various opinions expressed on his film toward his own ends, including the gathering public opinion in India against the decision of the Indian government to finance part of the Rs 22 crore project, that it is not unlikely that whatever attempts are made now to understand the issues involved would be misused in the same manner. In the possible event of a reply from his public relations men, for they have been extremely alert in replying to criticisms in even small journals, or from any of his numerous defendants and apologists, this fact may please be borne in mind.

I would like to express my gratitude to Parag Amladi, who was closely associated with the writing of this article, and who supplied the references from *Cahiers du Cinema*.

1. From David Niven's *Bring on the Empty Horses*, p. 319.
2. Official Collectors' Edition, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Columbia Pictures, p.28.
3. Much of the next argument is based on 'John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln*', by the editors of *Cahiers du Cinema*. Published in *Screen Reader 1*, SEFT; and also in *Movies & Methods*, ed., Bill Nichols, UCLP. This reference in *Screen Reader 1*, p.123.
4. *Screen Reader 1*, p.127.
5. *Screen Reader 1*, p.126.
6. *Screen Reader 1*, p.127.

Myth and Ritual: Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*

Ira Bhaskar

FROM TIME immemorial man has grappled with his unconscious and attempted to apprehend it at various levels. In the process, certain archetypes have been projected from the recesses of his collective unconscious. These are peculiar to different civilizations, but a recurring one is that of the Mother Goddess. The process of birth and the sustenance of life must have fascinated and intrigued primitive man, who sought a simplistic comprehension of it. His bewilderment at the cycle of birth, death and regeneration was externalized in the creation of the archetype of the Mother Goddess. In this simplistic resolution he had touched upon a profound universal. The mythic process of externalizing and making abstract primordial rhythms had begun.

This process in its cyclical pattern moved from abstraction to concretization through rituals. A renewal of faith and an obeisance to the unknown, the ritual literalized the 'supranormal' qualities that the mythic figure had been consecrated with. Having brought the abstraction to a comprehensible level, ritual made possible a living experience of myth. This archetypal reaction contains within it the seed of all artistic expression. Thus, myth and ritual lie at the very root of art.

Within the cinematic medium, few artists have been as sensitive to these underlying structures as Ritwik Ghatak (1925-76). 'Comparative mythology illustrates certain fundamentals of art... for example, the archetypes. The social, collective unconscious was present even before

men became complete. All the deepest feeling of mankind originates here and certain archetypes control the reaction of man to different situations. . . .The archetype manifests itself as a symbol through images.' This deep concern with archetypes informs the main body of his work. Orchestrated repeatedly in all his films, the concern is best integrated in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960).

Working at various levels, the film depicts the struggle of a working-girl to support her refugee family in post-partition Bengal. Nita, the protagonist (Supriya Chowdhury) is exploited by her parasitic family. The crippled and defenceless father and the bitter, conniving mother have been broken by the traumatic upheaval in their past. Unable to provide for their family, they look to the eldest daughter for succour. The whims and fancies of her petty, self-centred younger sister (Gita) and brother (Montu) result in further demands being made on her. The elder brother Shankar, who is obsessed by the desire to become a classical musician, remains her only sympathizer. Yet, being unemployed and in need of sympathy and encouragement himself, he is more dependent on her than are the rest of the family. Sanat, with whom she is in love, betrays her idealism and faith by discontinuing his research and marrying her sister Gita. Suffocated by the oppressive claims made on her, her isolation is complete when the people in her life become established and go their own ways. Gita and Sanat are mired in the mediocrity of their marriage; fledgling Montu finds his wings and leaves the nest, and Shankar returns as a musician of repute. The now complacent mother has no further use for Nita who is now relegated to a peripheral role. Nita realizes her alienation - 'I was watching how all of you are established now. I am free as I was in my childhood' -- an ironic reference to an idyllic childhood experience in the hills. She contracts TB and is further ostracized until the shattered father, in a moment of desperation, bids her leave the house.

Shankar, the successful musician, has arranged for Nita's convalescence in a Shillong sanatorium: 'You are at last going to the hills.' The hills recur consistently in Nita's story. They represent to her the freedom of childhood and the elevation to a heightened state of existence; and she yearns for them as a symbol of release from the bondage of a mundane life. An important cinematic motif is a photograph of her and Shankar as children, watching the sunrise from a hill top. Desperately trying to keep her fragmenting self together, she often asks Shankar to

take her to the hills when she is free. When departing to pursue his music, Shankar reiterates the promise of return to the hills as Nita breaks down. When she finally leaves for the hills -- during a storm -- her precious photograph falls and breaks. Her desire for life at this point of time, when she is completely spent, is expressed in her impassioned plea -- 'I wanted to live; I want to live!' The camera pans to the hills evoking, ironically, her symbolic release in destruction.

Referring to the fusion of *rasa* in art, Ghatak once said, 'A man enjoys *rasa* depending on his capability of imbibing *rasa* . . . for example, films. At the primary level there may be a story of laughter and tears, of joys and sorrows. . . . Deeper, we find political and social implications. . . . [Still] deeper, we find the directions depending on the philosophy and the consciousness of the artist....Even deeper the temporal feeling cannot be expressed in words. At that moment he confronts the unknown. 'All response to art is a personal equation and each one reacts at his own aesthetic level. Truly great art touches all these different levels and this happens to be the fundamental pre-condition of all great art.' The enormity of his exacting yardstick is commendably realized in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. On the socio-historic level, Ghatak poignantly captures the refugee ethos in the Bengal after 1947. The trauma of partition weighed heavily on the filmmaker and in a paranoid exorcise he returned to the theme again in *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*. It is in going beneath these layers that Ghatak confronts and indeed uses the mythic understructure of our civilization. In his words, 'the earliest example of art-work we get belongs to the paleolithic age in the naked Mother Goddess....This Great Mother is still haunting the consciousness of the people.' Nita, in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is unconsciously creating and perpetuating this archetype.

Yet it would be naive to conceive Nita as the embodiment of the Mother Goddess herself. The female principle of Shakti is a fusion of 'Jagatdhatri', the benevolent image of the eternal giver, with 'Kali', the malevolent and destructive aspect. This duality is the keystone of Hindu cosmogony and Heinrich Zimmer has succinctly summed it up, 'The creative principle and the destructive are one and the same. Both are in unison in the divine cosmic energy that becomes manifest in the process of the biography and history of the universe.' Ghatak attempts to function with the totality of this complex archetype.



Retrospect in isolation

Supriya Chowdhury in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*



The exploiting family

A scene from *Meghe Dhaka Tara*

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A prevalent story about the genesis of Durga is the concept of *Havyagni* (oblation to the sacrificial fire). In the ritual of the *Havan* (the act of consigning mortal offerings to the sacrificial flames) is symbolized the surrender of human desires and aspirations, which are carried to the heavens with the smoke of the flames. It is believed that Durga was born out of this smoke as a transmutation of human desires, taking the form of 'Jagatdhatri', the universal sustainer. One of the central images associated with Nita is the courtyard, where the ambitions of the rest of the family appear to be constantly expressed. Montu's desire for football shoes, Gita's craving for a new saree, Shankar's need for money and an emotional base to nurture his ambition, or the mother's incessant carping about sustaining her family are the selfish aspirations poured out in the courtyard, the symbolic *yagna-mandapa*, from which Nita is manifested in the role of the Provider and Creator. Composed centrally in the courtyard, she is ruthlessly relegated to the periphery (both cinematically and metaphorically) when her utility is over.

The other motifs for Nita are the tree and water, ancient images for *Prakriti*. While the tree provides shelter and refuge, water has always been associated with the primal force of creation. Interestingly enough, whenever Shankar is singing, the tree and water are elements of the cinematic composition. While he is immersed in the invocation to the Great Mother, asking for the boon of music and *guna* quality -- "Jai Maata Vilumbh taj de Ma--gaan guna de' - in Raag Hamsadhwani, Nita often passes by on her way home, emerging from under a huge, spreading banyan tree. On one such occasion he notices the passing figure and runs after her only to discover that it is a friend of Nita's. The overtones of this scene are realized only in the last sequence of the film. Returning from the hills after Nita's death, Shankar stops at the general store and Bangshi (the grocer) comments, 'No one remembers her now.' Shankar looks away only to see the friend pass by, stop and pick up her broken slipper (a characteristic gesture of Nita). Looking back, she smiles and continues on her way. Unable to contain himself, Shankar breaks down. The archetypal Jagatdhatri is thus manifested 'as a symbol through images'.

A significant relationship is built up at a deeper level between Nita and her mother. Associated with the hearth and the sound of boiling rice, the mother is the titular provider of the family. Unable to fulfil her responsibilities because of her decrepit husband, she preys upon

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Nita in order to keep the hearth going. Thus she perpetuates the image of Chandi, feeding upon life to sustain life. Threatened at the prospect of Nita marrying Sanat, she thwarts their relationship by tacitly encouraging Gita's flirtations -- the sensual extension of the female principle. When the father objects to the marriage of Gita and Sanat, she retorts, 'What will you eat if Nita goes?' Oblivious to Nita's agony, she prepares for the impending wedding with all the usual enthusiasm of a bride's mother. She does not even balk at the blatant suggestion of a life of continued sterility for Nita, also a daughter. In taking the latter's gold bangles for Gita, the mother destroys any illusion of fulfilment in love and marriage that Nita may have harboured. The realization of the destructive, militant Kali image is complete. Nita is sacrificed so that the rest of her family may survive. The deconsecration of Nita has begun.

Deconsecration is the final phase of ritual whereby the concretization of myth returns to its state of abstraction. All the implications of the archetype that Nita is living are set off by the Baul song, used repeatedly in the film. Evoking the ritual of the immersion of Durga, it foreshadows the end of Nita herself. Legend has it that Durga spends five days at her father's house (on earth) and then returns to her consort, Mahadeva. The enactment of the immersion to the strain of holy chants and folk songs - 'Come Durga, come to me' -- is the ritualistic deconsecration of the Durga image. The return to the elemental state is therefore achieved by destruction. The Baul song (with this association) recurs at the various points in the film which contribute to the destruction of Nita: when Sanat hints that he cannot wait very long, at the time of Gita's marriage, when it is discovered that Nita has TB, and finally when she leaves her home. On this last occasion the camera closes in on Nita's rain-drenched face and the suggestion of immersion in the regenerating rain is obvious. From this close-up, Ghatak cuts to a shot of the hills. Through destruction, release and regeneration have become possible.

It is tempting to interpret Nita's final plea - 'I want to live' - as a failure of the life-impulse and the negation of the Mother Goddess. But Nita has always been trapped in human conflict while perpetuating the archetypal image. This dying statement sums up the tragic realization of her frustrated existence. Cast in the mould of the classical tragic protagonist, Nita destroys herself in the quest for identity. Uncon-



Her mother preys upon Nita to keep the
hearth going.



Regeneration: Nita's rain-drenched face
Supriya Chowdhury in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*

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ciously subscribing to the archetypal image in this quest, her actions at the human level are motivated by a desire to fulfill herself. Conscious of her ordinariness, she attempts self-realization in the achievements of Sanat and Shankar. With the tragic reversal comes the anagnorisis (self-realization) - 'I've committed a great sin, I never protested.' Like in the case of Oedipus, in her destruction lies the rejuvenation of the community.

In her reunion with the hills, a symbol of eternity and Mahadeva, the regeneration of the archetype is effected. After the ritualistic deconsecration, Durga returns to her consort in the symbolic union of *Prakriti* and *Purusha*, ensuring the continuum of life. Speaking about the archetype in cinema, Ghatak said, 'when some images develop as an inevitable consequence and again become inconsequential in the process of turning into symbols (as in the death of Nita), it is only then that the archetypal force is born.' After the deconsecration is complete, Nita ceases to be of any significance as an individual but the archetype is continually perpetuated. In the last sequence wherein Shankar mistakes, for a moment, the friend for Nita, is contained the archetypal process itself.

Ritual brings myth and archetypes within our comprehension. Paradoxically, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* becomes a ritual in itself, not very different from the ritual of classical tragedy. Ghatak believed that 'film-going is a kind of ritual. When the lights go out the screen takes over ... a filmmaker throws up certain ideas and it is the audience who fulfil it... only then does it become a total whole.' With the end of comprehensible ritual, the cycle of mythic abstraction begins again - the struggle with the unknown. Ritual and myth thus complete the cycle of artistic creativity.

'A Statement of Bias'

Jasodhara Bagchi

Ritwik Ghatak : A Return to the Epic

Ashish Rajadhyaksha

Screen Unit, Bombay, 1983, 148 pp., Rs 45.

THIS SLIM volume has fulfilled a long standing need for a serious and sensitive evaluation of the artistry of Ritwik Ghatak's films. Undoubtedly one of the most outstanding artists of India in recent times, Ritwik Ghatak has, unfortunately, remained an esoteric name, a caviare to the general. Ritwik himself has expressed obvious pleasure on being called, on a certain occasion, a 'people's artist'. How does one resolve this basic ambivalence in the position of Ritwik Ghatak as an artist? The book will go some way in answering this question.

Ritwik Ghatak's life as an artist represents one of the classic instances of the dilemma of an artist in a Third World situation. He shares with Satyajit Ray the distinction of launching the new Indian Cinema in the early fifties. Despite its long and, one supposes, agonizing gestation, Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* did reach out to the larger world of audience and succeeded in creating a new language in Indian cinema. Thus was born a cinema that was going to fight the main channel of the commercial Indian cinema which proliferated with the usual logic of the underdevelopment of Indian society.

Nagarik, which by its own right should have initiated yet another authentic tradition of film making for honest filmmakers who would want to get out of the trap of commercial films, did not see the light of day. This initial blackout hounded Ritwik right through his spectacular career, when with hardly any box-office success to give him either

financial or any other kind of support, he still succeeded in making eight major feature films and several brilliant short films. Among the few personal assets that did accrue in a life otherwise racked by frustration and uncertainty were the months in the Film Institute in Pune where he built up a group of brilliant and devoted pupils who discussed the art of filmmaking and the special kind of commitment it demands of a filmmaker in modern India. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ritwik, who had devoted his rare art to the agony and the ecstasy of life in Bengal should find his first serious critic in a young journalist from Maharashtra.

At the very outset, Rajadhyaksha lays his cards honestly on the table. His book will not try to ascertain the significance of Ritwik Ghatak's artistry in the manner of a neutral 'judge'; his objectivity will be a 'radical objectivity', 'a statement of bias rather than a false neutrality'. As an artist Ritwik assiduously avoided the cold 'disinterested' objectivity of a liberal. It is only fitting that his passionate 'engagement' with the historical specificity of his time and with the enduring demands of his medium should be confronted with at least a comparable commitment in the critic. Such a commitment the young author of the book has brought to his task.

However, a sense of commitment alone to an artist like Ritwik, whom Rajadhyaksha describes as 'enormously relevant to the present', does not safeguard a tricky venture like writing a book on him. In many existing tributes paid to the artist we have noticed the sad absence of a rigorous framework or even of viable tools of analysis without which the complex and rich artistry of Ritwik cannot be captured. There is a particularly deceptive quality of irrepressibility about Ritwik's art which has misled people. It has tended to hide the careful intellectual who has left a distinct and coherent corpus of work behind him. The present book has avoided such a trap with refreshing vigour and sensitivity. One hopes this book will break new ground in modern film criticism by which film aesthetics will be strengthened by a corresponding awareness of the socio-historic situation that gives rise to such an aesthetic.



Central to the book is an exposition of the social reality which

Ritwik has confronted and appropriated in his art and a sustained attempt at unfolding the nature of this appropriation. In his approach to Ritwik's art *Rajadhyaksha* treats the problem of the mediation of reality as a mythical one. The clue to Ritwik's art is seen to lie in its use of myths:

Central to the present study on Ritwik Ghatak is the concept of myth . . . One could begin with a simple idea of the myth -- as an encrustment of a particular configuration of ideas never challenged, a particular set of images that have come to achieve total acceptability within a culture-specific society. (p.10)

The total assent that myth can command is due to the subterranean levels of consciousness of the entire community that can get reflected in a myth. As *Rajadhyaksha* is quick to point out, this makes myth particularly susceptible to the dominant ideology. How does a radical artist like Ritwik Ghatak get compulsively drawn towards a myth-based representation of reality in his films? Is it merely a concession to the Western modernist benediction of reality with the sanction of a tradition going back to antiquity, a neo-colonial kow-towing to modernist ideology of the West which has become so rampant among the academic and creative establishments alike?

Rajadhyaksha's explanation is that Ritwik's engaging with myth in the narrative structure of his films is an 'attempt to extend class-struggle to its wider, more all-encompassing form of a conflict of tradition'. The radical confrontation of myth is to break it by displacing it and it is thereby 'shown to be false in a context different from the one it brings with itself. Such a displacement, and the consequent opening out of the myth' is called 'signification', the process of which begins with, 'to use Brecht's phrase, the "showing up [of] the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators". (p.10)

The result of the opening up of the myth by displacing it from its original unassailability is the epic method of Ghatak. In a paragraph which alternates between opaqueness and clarity *Rajadhyaksha* explains the way Ghatak's use of myth generates an epic mode:

We can see how the process of taking on myths becomes a larger and larger battle as the antagonistic forces become stronger. If the process begins here, as subterranean forms of exploitation are dragged into the light of consciousness it culminates in the epic. One might define the epic in slightly wider context than the Brechtian and see the form as the rallying point of a class [sic] or, as it has been in the past, of even civilization.

The epic form uses the mythic structure but it breaks down its static atemporality and gives it a dynamic velocity with which the totality of our social experience may be appropriated.

...myth seals off a configuration of images from their material base, while the epic achieves a synthesis of form, a unity of perception that is the first step towards the overcoming of the fragmentation of our social sensibility. (p.11)

Use of myth in modernist literature in the West has often been an ideological weapon to seal off a work of art from its historical material base, to insulate it against conflicting social pressures latent in the situation of its creation. Ritwik has seized the modernist mode and has used it to generate a sustained critique of his own historical predicament. He has fully utilized the fact that myths are not dead forms here as they are in Western society today. They permeate the fabric of our society and enter into the social conflicts. They are used to define the consciousness of both the dominant and the dominated cultures of our society. The open-ended form that Ritwik brings to life helps to bring out the industrial exploitation and the vast depredation of popular culture in the countryside that is the legacy of our colonial past and neo-colonial present. To this extent it is important to focus upon the epic method of Ritwik's art. In two of the early chapters of the book *Rajadhyaksha* analyses the historical and the aesthetic situation in which Ritwik found himself and which he confronted with great energy with his artistic experiments. In the pithy chapter on the Partition, the author has acutely perceived the reason for Ritwik's obsession with the partition of Bengal which lent tragic overtones to the political independence of the sub-continent in 1947. Commentators on Ritwik's films have shown impatience with this obsession and have vulgarly interpreted it as a nostalgia typical of the Hindu zamindari ethos which had actively collaborated with our colonial masters to exploit the Muslim peasantry of East Bengal. *Rajadhyaksha* is right in pointing out that Ritwik's anger against the partition is an expression of his class-hatred:

The initial question of the split of Bengal was to become for him a larger quest -- an attempt at portraying the relationships between the new classes formed by the process of urbanization and the machine-revolution, and their old traditions. It led him to take a look at the whole issue of rootlessness afresh -- the search of the refugee for a new identity. (p.15)

Homelessness is transformed in the complex structure of Ritwik's films

from a mere Romantic quest motif into a rigorous examination of the terrible predicament offered by the modern Indian situation. The most complex achievement of this structure is to be seen in his extraordinary swan song, *Jukti Takko ar Gappo*. In this film the search for the real Bengal can begin only after his personal home is dismantled and the wandering Ritwik turns himself into a myth.

The author devotes a longish chapter to an analysis of the 'dominant tradition' against which Ritwik's achievement has to be measured. This is a very ambitious chapter and one feels that there should have been a little more careful exploration of the sources of this dominant tradition. The question of nationalist myths, in particular, have been dealt with somewhat cursorily, ignoring a body of interesting writings on the subject. The process by which the myths of the colonial masters have been absorbed in the ideology of the new ruling class has not been made at all clear. Particularly blurred is the over-hasty account of the myth of the 'Indian village' associated with the 'urban-rural imbalance' of both the colonial and the post-colonial period.

Rajadhyaksha is on surer ground when he discusses the problem of the representation of the 'dominant tradition' in the world of art, taking as two nodal points Ananda Coomaraswamy, the leading exponent of an idealistic interpretation of Indian art and Satyajit Ray in whom the realistic style of modern Indian films has found one of the most compelling spokesmen. Coomaraswamy is taken as a high watermark in our nationalist idealism when a return to the unchanging eternity of the so-called Indian mind is offered as a viable critique of the fragmented sensibility of the 'modern' soul in a capitalist society. A return to the glory of ancient India, which was an off-shoot of the Enlightenment search for the 'Golden Age', had given birth to British Orientalism at the end of the eighteenth century, which had, in its turn filtered through to the German Idealist aesthetics. This particular tradition was absorbed both by the imperialist ideology and by the nationalist one, though with significant change of emphasis. Within the image of unchanging India, the Brahminical culture of the dominators co-existed happily with the 'folk' culture of the dominated. This benevolent paternalistic order generated myths which exuded beatitude and timelessness. The hierarchical vision of Coomaraswamy could offer a critique of modern society only because it had the right kind of legitimization from within the system. The ideal of contemplation propounded by him had already

had the blessings of critics and art-historians in Western society. In fact the glorification of 'myth' in idealistic terms that we witness in Coomaraswamy, need not be seen as entirely alien to the 'modernist' revolution in the West. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards myth has been increasingly used in art and literature to shut out history. The task of the opening out of myth to act as a vehicle of the conflict and the violence of the present is a task of extending the 'critical realist' tradition itself, using the new potential generated by the discovery of the unconscious and the primitive by psychologists and anthropologists.

In the case of Ritwik himself confronting the reality of a semi-feudal society like India, the compulsion of the mythic life has to be understood somewhat differently than is the case with Western artists like Thomas Mann. The reality of the 'Third World' (a rather dirty word in this book, I notice) called for a very different configuration of the mythic life. It was precisely the phenomenon of underdevelopment which allowed Ritwik the freedom to unleash the mythic life of the community to mount a sustained onslaught on the half-baked and servile ideas of progress foisted on us by the ruling classes. Ritwik uses the mythic structure to bring out the epic dimensions of the violent tenor of modern Indian life.

To argue, as Rajadhyaksha has done in the next section, that the mythic, open-ended structure of Ritwik's films is to be seen as entirely antagonistic to the realist tradition, is to impose a pattern on Ritwik's art which is not true to the experience of most viewers of Ritwik's films. While the author has shown, with considerable sensitivity, the strength of Satyajit Ray's realism as a redemption of Italian neo-realism with the lyrical naturalism of the Tagore tradition, his argument about the bankruptcy of the Realist tradition lacks similar conviction. Particularly unconvincing and partial is his citing the authority of Ernst Fischer in order to describe the 'crisis in Realism', based on a somewhat perfunctory linking of the Realist with the Romantic one. It is perhaps this fudging of the basic theoretical position that has made his curt dismissal of all realistic films in India rather suspect:

Even more than Ray's own work, it is the realist school, which is what passes for 'serious' cinema in the country and would like to claim its inspiration from Ray, that indicated the utter bankruptcy of the realist tradition in India. (p.28)

It is further implied that the 'Third World' situation is particularly vulnerable to this debased 'realist' convention. The tyranny of the 'photographic image' and its concomitant narrative structure upholding the 'directness of the photographic image' gets most easily expropriated by the mass-media and, therefore, it ends up with the 'pygmification of culture'. In a passage with a barely concealed sneer, our young author takes up a position that is disturbingly patronizing. It is argued that in the developed countries which have gone beyond the crisis in realism:

No serious filmmaker will take on a naive realist stance today except in a 'popular' sense. In the 'third world', however, no filmmaker can move outside the realist convention without facing the terrible risk of being branded 'elitist'. (p.30)

It will be quite wrong to allege that the wicked neglect of Ritwik by the world of commercial consumption is due to his 'elitism'. In all that one can think or say about the complexity and challenge of Ritwik's striking presentation of Indian reality, what comes through in a most irrepressible manner is the total engagement of the artist with the interstices of the lived reality he depicts with such warmth. The mythic level that Ritwik constantly reaches out towards is not a formalist withdrawal from that reality but a more eager espousal of it to bring out the revolutionary potential in it.

In a later chapter the opposition of the two traditions, the realist and the epic, are discussed under the heading, 'Towards a Materialism of Cinema'. The Romantic-Realist build-up of the individual and the domination of the narrative is related here to Marx's theory of the alienation of man. However, the arguments about arriving at an 'alternate tradition' from the writings of Marx and Engels are not properly worked out. For instance, the point about the conflict of the quiet violence of the modern industrial revolution with an entirely opposite vision of society and civilization is left quite unexplained, and from this there is a sudden leap into the conflict with realism in films:

This is exactly the tradition within which Rossellini works in his use of the profound experience of war, and Eisenstein in *Battleship Potemkin* and *October*. Here images dominate, overcoming both the passivity of realism and the stranglehold of narrative, and in their affectivity begin approximating to the archetypal (p.122) It is in this 'collective unconscious' of the universal archetypes that man can overcome his alienation, 'reassert himself as a species being, overcome the forces that isolate him'. (p.121)



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Ritwik Ghatak 1925-76

There is a point about this presentation which should have been brought out with much sharper clarity. The point is that Ritwik's Marxist conviction kept him particularly alive to the material base of the myths which he has constantly used to open out the narrative structure of his films. This is why he has avoided the typical idealist trap of an aesthetician like Coomaraswamy who has used the mythic image to seal off the historical present. In a fine comparison with Bunuel's *Nazarin* (Ritwik himself has acknowledged Bunuel often), Rajadhyaksha cites a particularly poignant shot of Neeta from *Meghe Dhaka Tara* to show how the image goes beyond the simple individuation of photographic reality towards an archetypal extension. In the latent conflict between the linear narrative-realist tradition and a confrontation with the archetype, we see the peculiar tension and richness of Ritwik's art which gives it its distinctiveness.

* * * * *

This brings us to the most substantial section of the book in hand, viz., the remarkable analysis of the cluster of films that Ritwik had made up to the middle of the sixties. Predictably, the analysis of *Nagarik* is the least sure, since it is made in the tradition of realism generated by the People's Theatre movement. There is a clear break in the mode of presentation between *Nagarik* and the next film *Ajantrik*. On the whole, Rajadhyaksha demonstrates very convincingly, that with his second film we come to a 'tradition' of narration that has not been tried out 'in modern Indian art with its realist preoccupations'. This is subject to the doubt we have already expressed whether this mode is to be considered outside the realist tradition. But in the hands of Ritwik, from *Ajantrik* onwards, we certainly come across a bringing together of the totality of Indian life which has not been captured on the Indian screen. This Rajadhyaksha would see as 'a refusal to acknowledge the compositional aspect of form' on the part of the realist tradition of Indian art. While it is extremely important to remember the great significance of the unleashing of the true vitality of the material base of Indian life in the hands of Ritwik through his clear-sighted use of the Indian mythic life, I feel it is not quite right to think of Ritwik's use of myth as outside the realist tradition. What Ritwik has assiduously avoided, even in his first film *Nagarik* which is etched with a fine sense of stylized form, is the pure unmixed empiricism and naturalism, a passive submission to commonsense reality, which Rajadhyaksha has

eloquently termed a 'pygmification of culture, a receding of self before the all-pervasive brother that is the dominant tradition' (p. 31). What Ritwik has done is to bring his sense of the material base of the exploitation in our society into his historical presentation of reality. Though he was once judged at the bar of the official Communist Party and found to be guilty, there is no doubt that a particularly mechanical criterion of socialist realism must have been applied to his art in that instance. Ritwik, on the contrary, displays the kind of revolutionary awareness of the material reality of Indian life which allows him a far firmer and far richer grasp of reality itself. Far from being a deviant from the path of realism, Ritwik's art is a striking fulfilment of the realist aspirations within modern Indian society. His practice of the epic style is also justified by him because the epic is still part of our everyday life in India. The boldness with which Ritwik has combined modern sources of writings on the significance of the unconscious in the Jungian archetype, as well as the findings of comparative mythology with the Indian mythology in everyday use, such as the myth of Uma (Durga) in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* or the image of Kali, the principle of destruction in *Subarnarekha*, is a symptom of the firmness of Ritwik's grasp of Indian reality in its historical perspective.

The greatest strength of the book is its superb account of the three vintage films of Ritwik, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*. Specially masterly is the detailed analysis of the first film, which is the most beautiful film that Ritwik created. Ritwik has himself talked about his use of mythology in these three films. But Ashish Rajadhyaksha has delved deep into the complex aesthetic structures that Ritwik had built up in them. His use of myth has compelled the camera to divest the naturalistic setting of lower middle class life, with a renewed depth of meaning. The use of the structure of Indian classical music to lend a significant pattern to his film sequences has been demonstrated in the book with a care that gives this book a very special place in film criticism in India. Taking issue with Satyajit Ray who has commented, on more than one occasion, on the absence of drama in Indian classical music, Rajadhyaksha has demonstrated, with some understanding, the way the *ragas* used in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* gradually open out the narrative to a deeper level of perception.

Meghe Dhaka Tara provides the most tightly worked out presentation of the special mode in which Ritwik is working. It is the most

The same approach also yields very interesting results with the next two films. At several points in the discussion, however, one misses a comparison and linking up with *Titash Ekti Nadir Nam*, possibly the most epic of Ritwik's films. The overpowering presence of the river in these two films invariably look forward to the late film where the river represents the primordial life-spirit of the Malo community and Basanti, the Malo woman, becomes almost identified with the river itself. What the critic says about the theatrical troupe in *Komal Gandhar* facing the river Padma, standing for the lost homeland, is brought out with a stark majesty in *Titash*, a film, most unfortunately, not discussed in the book:

it recalls the primordial being in oneself, the first expression of the raw order in nature that we, of the post-urban culture fail to recognize but which is recognized among all people who still depend on nature for their survival. (p.87)

By avoiding a tame and submissive bowing down before reality, Ritwik's art has kept us alive to the shock of living in a society in which mythic, the most archetypal of Ritwik's works. He has said very explicitly, that in this film the contribution of the writer of the story is minimal. He named the story after Shakespeare's 'cloud-clapped star' and he has used in it that part of Indian mythology which is most intimately a part of his own life. He has himself said about the film:

The symbology of Uma is very explicit here. Neeta is the most favourite among the characters created by me. I have imagined her as the symbol of Bengali girls given away (*Gouridan*) for hundreds of years. She is born at the time of *Jagaddhatri Puja*. She is re-united with the mountain as *Mahakala* in her death. When the first hint of her departure comes with the early indication of tuberculosis, someone sings the songs of Menoka lamenting her daughter's impending departure at *Bijoya*. Just before her extinction Neeta dreams of her radiant surroundings through a childhood memory of watching sunrise from a hilltop.

Rajadhyaksha has certainly brought out the different levels of 'rasa' that Ritwik has himself talked about. In his analysis the simple story of a typical middle-class refugee family, with the burden of their familiar economic struggles inevitably falling on the shoulder of the working girl of the family, gradually gets defamiliarized into the most complex structure of epic proportions.

the primordial jostles with the so-called pressures of progress. In the process human lives are torn apart, but without a final succumbing of the human will. From his first film *Nagarik* to the final epic about the predicament of our community which he fashioned out of slices of his own life in *Jukti Takka ar Gappo*, Ritwik has maintained a heroic stance in his confrontation with reality. Talking of the sequence in *Subarnarekha* when the little girl Seeta meets a man dressed like the goddess of destruction Kali on an deserted airstrip, Ritwik's comment is:

I somehow feel the entire human civilization has suddenly faced the archetypal image of the terrible Mother. Today the question of life and death of the entire civilization depends on that confrontation.

The Fantastic as Verbal Fabrication

Alok Bhalla

The Literary Sign Language of German Romanticism

Marianne Thalmann, translated by Harold A. Basilius
Detroit.

... and this life
Is but a dream, and dreams are only dreams.
Calderon, *Life Is a Dream*

FOR CRITICAL texts constructed on formalist or structuralist assumptions, Romantic tales of the nineteenth century have become fabulous sources for a variety of spatial designs, structural models, signs, ornaments and images. For formalist or structural critics, confident of discovering a complex, recurrent and perpetually available grammar of signs, these romances are extravagant fabrications. Free from all concern with the Self or history, tales of fantasy and romance are for these critics primarily triumphs of elegant style, gorgeous craft or strange imaginings. It appears that there is a quest for 'pure' metalinguistic models (of which nineteenth century Romantic or Gothic tales are 'impure' models)¹ which would possess, like the analogical models of 'the fall' or of the 'noble savage', metaphysical priority² over all such historically conditioned social and economic models within which we may attempt to give order to the unexpectednesses of our daily experiences. The readings of the Fantastic which emerge from these assumptions and longings are often subtle and illuminating.³ Yet these versions are neither adequate nor convincing for they are touched by a falsifying nostalgia for structures which are unimplicated, or detached, from the disconcerting temporality of the world of human events.

Nineteenth century fantastic tales are often made up of a series of fragmentary stories of agony and decay, and they are told by a variety of narrators who are acutely self-conscious of specific moments of crisis within a culture. They do not always replicate the spatial order or

the linear coherence or the calm composure of those structures rationally cultivated out of mysterious, exotic or lurid signs. There is no grammatology of the Fantastic.⁴ Any account of the formal properties of these tales must fail if it refuses to recognize their fragmented and grotesquely ruptured narratives as adequate modes of rendering the Self's experience of temporality and suffering, of loss of ethical or spiritual authority and of alienation at a specific moment of political, economic or moral crisis within a culture. These nineteenth century tales do not lead one away from the world, but are rather examples of the Self's inability to think and work its way back into any recognizable moral community.

In Marianne Thalmann's otherwise imaginative, even brilliant book, the Romantic or the Fantastic tale is read as nothing more than a wonderfully fabricated, but inessential, dream or nightmare each element of which can be isolated, classified and rearranged to craft a new dream or nightmare. She insists, for instance, that in the stories of Tieck both content and meaning are unimportant. 'Every one of Tieck's fairy tales', she says, 'is a model in its use of literary signs. In the last analysis the tale is made from a bird song in which the words dance out of line, from the scarlet of a dress and the bloody red in the silver chalice, from a fare goblet and a life between a lute which is out of tune and the hieroglyphs of ancient books.' (p. 22) For her the Romantic tale, possessing no informing social or moral vision, is an architectural design whose significance lies in the fantastic arrangement of hieroglyphic, but value-free, signs and images. The romantic teller of tales is thus, like Daedalus, the secular and amoral designer of labyrinths, fabricating worlds of ornamental reveries which reflect some 'inner fantasia' (Novalis) far removed from the apprehensions of those passions, perversities and desires which simultaneously shape, and infect the Self in the modern city. Thalmann asserts that these fantastic creations are totally abstracted from the dull, grey world of everyday life where the living must perpetually wage 'contention with their time's decay' (Shelley); they are artifices designed for aesthetic pleasure from a profusion of strangely coloured objects and exotic creatures that do not exist and hence cannot moulder and die as things and beings of time. The Romantic artist is, she says, an occultist of signs, a magnificent crafter of mythic and pastoral paradises where the unrest of the city is always stilled into a prismatic order. Thus, it turns out that the Fantastic signifies nothing beyond itself.

This conclusion, based largely upon a closely considered reading of the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann, is indeed startling. The very premises of the analysis rule out any possibilities of considering the Fantastic or the Romantic tale as critiques of all crafted paradises which bear no witness to the experiential world in which men participate and through which alone they can realize the fullness of their creative potential. Hoffmann's tales, like the Gothic novel or the Romantic poem, are much more than elegant strategies designed to evade the wilderness of events in the real world. Indeed, looked at from a different perspective, they turn out to be *criticisms* of all desire for astonishment by fantasies and fabricated forms. In *The Sand-Man*, for example, the hero Nathanael is baffled and destroyed when he falls in love with a beautifully constructed living doll whose mechanisms are made by a demonic alchemist. The criticism here of the social and moral irresponsibility of the artist is the same as in that great romantic tale *Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus*. Similarly, criticism is voiced against the Self's deliberate estrangement from the community of men in Hoffmann's *The Mines of Falun*. Here the pilgrim-poet, Elis Froebom, gets fatally lost in a dream enchanted world. Elis's dazzlement by the mines that glitter with metallic trees and plants which burn with mysterious coloured fires, testifies to the unregenerative aspect of fabricated nature and the sterility of sensual passions without sympathetic love or imaginative concern. Elis is estranged from the profane world of the living (like Frankenstein, The Wandering Jew, Melmoth⁵ and other Romantic heroes) and is at the end absorbed in the cold, adamantine surfaces of coal. As in the case of Blake's Urizen, the God of fabricated universes, Elis's failure to humanely order the world of actual experiences, with all its disruptions and discontinuities leads to a gradual hardening of a living being into the nonentity of stones. Fabricated worlds which, as Thalmann asserts, the writers of romances desire, turn out to be nightmares; the wandering souls seeking within the charming artifices of crafted space either solace or distraction from the chaos and torment of the city discover there nothing but total loss of creative energies.

The limitations of this review do not permit any larger exploration of this theme,⁶ but the following ballad-tale in Isak Dinesen's Gothic romance *The Poet* is worth quoting in some detail. It makes a most deliciously frightful use of the theme of enchantment with a world removed from that of living human beings, and the consequent failure

of imagination:

In the end he found a little ballad to recite, a little gay drop of overflow from all that happiness and pain which had filled him lately. It was about a young man who goes to sleep in the forest and is taken into fairyland. The fairies love him and look after him with great concern, puzzling their little brains to make him happy. The delights of forest life were inspiredly painted, a long running out at the end of each stanza giving it something of the babbling of a spring in the woods. But the fairies never sleep and have no knowledge of sleep. Whenever their young friend, fatigued by exquisite pleasure, dozes off, they lament 'He dies, he dies!' and strain all their energy to keep him awake. So in the end, to their deep regret, the boy dies from lack of sleep.⁷

This fragment would serve well as a critique of those methods of formalist or structural analysis which seek to reduce the Fantastic (or any other work of art) to a harmless fabrication without any human ground, and without any historical reason.

- 1 Terms used by Victor Sklovsky, 'The Mystery Novel: Dickens' *Little Dorrit*', in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, (eds.) Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1971), p.220.
- 2 See Frederick Jameson, *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).
- 3 For example, Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, translated by Richard Howard (Cleveland and London: The Press of Case Western Univ., 1973).
- 4 There have been numerous interesting attempts to offer us one. See for example, Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, translated by Lawrence Scott (Austin and London: Univ. of Texas Press, 1968); Alan Dundes (ed.), *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood: Prentice-Hall, 1965); and Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976).
- 5 Hero of Charles Robert Maturin's great tale *Melmoth the Wanderer*. See also, amongst other things, Keats's *Lamia*.
- 6 See E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978).
- 7 *Seven Gothic Tales* (1939 rpt.; New York: Vintage Press, 1961), p. 387.

Nukkad Rang Mela

Madhava Prasad

APART FROM folk theatre performed in the open, modern street theatre, which is still in its youth, is the only theatre accessible to all strata of people. Modern street theatre groups have of late sprung up all over the country, in big cities as well as small towns. About twenty such groups participated at the Nukkad Rang Mela* at Bhopal.

Street theatre is usually done by amateurs, though some practitioners of the form have achieved professional competence through experience. The actors are normally students, teachers, workers and members of political parties or youth organizations. They are untrained and are trying to use the medium of theatre for a cause. Some of them involve themselves in civil rights movements. Only a few do street theatre full time. Most of them are engaged in theatre activity in their free time and operate mainly from an urban base, though they also travel to villages bordering their cities or towns.

Though the dominant preoccupation in street plays is political satire, it cannot be said that all such groups work with an ideological perspective. Most of the activity is really regarded as a form of social work, its aims varying from revolution to being a sort of newspaper for the illiterate. The groups try to achieve these aims through an art form. But not many groups have trained actors. In fact, only a few actors in these groups have even seen good, professional theatre, since they are based in small towns. Most of them act as best as they can, concentrat-

*A street theatre festival-cum-workshop at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, February, 1983.

ing on the transference of the message to the people. In the course of their activities, many questions which are difficult to resolve confront them. Can one afford to be indifferent to art? Should the emphasis be on art to the dilution of immediate effect? A few of them would even settle for 'pure' art!

Corruption in politics and administration, religious superstition and fanaticism, exploitation of the masses, unemployment, women's issues, workers' struggles – these are some of the subjects of street plays. They make use of folk and film songs with improvisations. In almost all the plays the actors directly address the audience. Plays have to be written to order as it were, sometimes within a few hours. The number of characters in a play might vary from show to show depending on the availability of actors. The most unlikely places form the venue for performances. Music is made with folk instruments and tins and cans, pots and pans.

Common to all the hectic, disorganized activity which constitutes street theatre is the element of social protest. Mangal Saxena, who leads a street theatre group in Rajasthan, observed that the very act of performing on the streets was a revolutionary step. If one is familiar with the realities of small towns, one realizes how true this is. Many groups from such towns spoke about the personal risks and difficulties they face in their day-to-day activity. Tripurari Sharma pointed out in her paper on the problems of street theatre that to work in street theatre groups is to dissociate yourself from your family and class. There are threats to be faced from landlords, the police and politicians.

In such a set-up the need most people at the workshop felt was for a programme, a political direction to street theatre activity. Prasanna, with his experience of Samudaya in Karnataka, spoke on the media aspect of theatre, seeking for street theatre a role in the preservation of the democratic tradition. He felt street theatre could act as a parallel rebel movement to bring popular culture back into the possession of the people. Such an overt and conscious political purpose for street theatre is yet to be accepted fully. At present there is only protest, anger and satire, exuberant but largely without direction (exceptions are the Jan Natya Manch, Delhi, Samudaya, Karnataka and, at least in intent, the IPTA units).

Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena pointed out that street theatre groups cannot sustain themselves unless they work with political parties. The left parties have been the first to sponsor such activity through their cultural units. (The present government at the centre also uses street theatre to educate the people on themes like family planning, hygiene, etc.)

Prasanna further described street theatre as graphic theatre, comparing it with the graphic arts. While emphasizing the political purpose of street theatre, he pointed out that its emergence was linked to the financial and other difficulties faced by trained theatre men.

Tripurari Sharma gave a detailed account of the problems of practice. She spoke of the need to seek the audience's good will by consistent work and how street theatre has go beyond accepted norms of protest if its work is to yield results.

B.V. Karanth, speaking on the challenges of acting in street theatre, said street theatre groups tended to compensate every deficiency by intellectual means. Effective communication is possible only through effective presentation. He said the skills of acting, learnt from the local folk theatre and through observation of local gestures, would make the medium more effective.

G.P. Deshpande presented a paper on Brecht's didactic theatre as an example of what street theatre should seek to achieve. Brecht conceived of didactic theatre as a means of politically educating the actor so that he can present a truly political theatre with clarity. In India today there is radical theatre, the theatre of protest, which eventually might lead nowhere. A truly political theatre should be able to show an alternative.

Bansi Kaul spoke on the use of space, colour and spectacle in street drama. He also emphasized the actor's competence to use space imaginatively and to create space for himself.

Rathi Bartholomew, speaking on 'Street Theatre Past and Present', emphasized the fact that street and proscenium theatre were not basically opposed to each other except in the manner of staging – the open informal staging of street theatre as against the naturalistic staging of

proscenium theatre. Street theatre rebels against the hierachial set-up inside auditoria where the actor and audience are separated with the audience 'sitting out' in darkness and where within the audience itself there is a hierarchy.

Anuradha Kapoor, expanding on this point, said that in street theatre the audience is as creative as the actor, participating in the process and seeing creatively. The audience enters into a tacit agreement with the actors to see what is meant to be seen and to ignore what is not. It is a situation which allows for maximum interaction between actor and audience and scope for imagination.

Namwar Singh, in his paper on radical aesthetics, first attacked the existing bourgeois aesthetics for turning art into an object and hence a commodity. Art has been separated from life and given an unreal identity. The function of a radical aesthetics is to examine the existing aesthetics, go to its roots and uproot it to make way for a new and human understanding of art.

There were several other smaller issues which were discussed at the workshop. The inability of participants of street theatre groups, so far, to work out a doctrine or to critically understand their work and the experience they get was one such issue. Many groups expressed the need for keeping in touch with each other, helping each other in everyway and working towards building an organization. Participants constantly leaving to seek their livelihood elsewhere, leaving a gap, is another practical problem. So too the fear that all the work might eventually come to nothing. City bred upper class street theatre actors are a minority. Most groups have people who live in the interior, in small towns and villages, who know and understand their regions and the problems of the people there. But they are unable to think with a national perspective. Lacking institutional support, they have to constantly struggle to survive. This is perhaps one reason why they do not think of going beyond the accepted norms of dissent.

It was an accepted fact in the initial stages in the rise of street theatre groups that they had to neglect or could not afford to concentrate on quality. But, as Anuradha Kapoor observed, this is now becoming an excuse for doing indifferent theatre. Cliches are repeated, the same plots are done over and over again, the story lines are weak and the acting is bad.

The tendency to use slogans and direct propaganda in street theatre was felt to be harmful. It is possible to reach the people and be accepted by them only by establishing a relationship through constant work. Street theatre can and should also entertain; satire need not be everything.

Also important is the actor's self. The street theatre actor plays two roles simultaneously: he is playing a character and is being himself. His responsibility is towards the role and an issue, as Rathi Bartholomew put it. It is a dialectical relationship.

Almost all the groups which participated in the festival performed on the streets of Bhopal every evening to appreciative response from the people of Bhopal. The groups also gave demonstrations followed by discussions, within the festival premises, for the participants. Improvisation is one of the essential features of street plays. A few sessions were devoted to this aspect and many groups presented plays which they claimed were written in two, three, four hours, before or even after coming to the workshop. There were performances based also on the exchange of scripts, the Jan Natya Manch's scripts proving to be very popular.

Whether or not street theatre can start off a cultural revolution, its importance as a social phenomenon cannot be denied. The sociology of this phenomenon should prove to be as interesting and valuable as that of any other.

Statement about ownership and other particulars about newspaper

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